默读

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Silent Reading / Priest

默读/*Silent Reading* by Priest - Book 1

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CHAPTER 1 - Prologue

The truth, the bitter truth.—The Red and the Black[1]

The zone around Yan City's North Nanping Road in the Flower Market District was like a demon with half a face of makeup.

The broad, straight two-way road split the whole of the Flower Market District in two. The East District was one of the city's busiest commercial centers, while the West District was a forgotten old slum, gathering place of the city's poor.

Following several years of properties in the East District successively being auctioned off at sky-high prices by real estate tycoons, the old neighborhood, badly in need of transformation, had caught some reflected glory. The cost of paying off and relocating the residents had risen with the tide, frightening off a clutch of developers and erecting a capital barrier among the cramped and impoverished alleys.

Neighbors living in dilapidated houses dreamed all day of using their dozen-square-meter run-down rooms to get rich overnight. Already they were feeling the sense of superiority from the idea that "my home is worth millions torn down."

Of course, these slum millionaires still had to put on their slippers and line up to empty their chamber pots every day.

There was still a chill in the air on this early summer night. The summer heat that had accumulated during the day was quickly overwhelmed. The barbecue carts illegally occupying the streets packed up and left one after another; the inhabitants enjoying the cool air went home early, too; occasionally an old streetlamp flickered unsteadily, most likely because the nearby illegally

crowded rentals were siphoning electricity off the power line.

Meanwhile, one street away in the commercial center, the night life was just getting started—

As evening approached, in a street-fronting coffee shop in the East District, a barista who had just finished dealing with a mass of customers finally seized a chance to take a deep breath. But before she could smooth her smile-stiffened features back into their original shape, the little bell hanging over the glass door rang yet again.

The barista had to once again put on her regulation smile. "Welcome."

"A decaf vanilla latte, please."

The customer was a tall and slender young man with hair almost down to his shoulders. He was dressed in sedate and solemn business attire, wearing glasses with metal frames. The thin frames sat on the high, straight bridge of his nose. He looked down to get out his wallet, his hair swinging forward over his chin and covering nearly half of his face. In the light his nose bridge and lips seemed to have been daubed with a layer of pale glaze. He looked cold and unapproachable.

Everyone appreciates beauty. The barista couldn't help glancing at him a few times. She made conversation, trying to guess the customer's preferences. "Would you like sugar-free vanilla in that?"

"No. Extra syrup, please." The customer handed over some change and looked up. The barista's eyes met his.

It must have been out of politeness that the customer was smiling at her. Behind the lenses, his eyes curved slightly, a warm and

somewhat suggestive expression at once breaking through his earlier display of solemn propriety.

The barista now found that while this customer was good-looking, it wasn't a regular and dignified sort of good-looking. There was a hint of peach blossom flirtation in his eyes. Her face inexplicably heated up and she quickly avoided the customer's gaze, looking down to input his order.

Luckily, the coffee shop's delivery guy came along then. The barista hurriedly gave herself something to do. She loudly called the delivery guy over behind the counter to verify the shipping manifest.

The delivery guy was a young fellow, around twenty, brimming all over with youth. He came into the coffee shop with the golden evening light. His skin was dark. He smiled, showing off a mouth full of small white teeth, and gave the barista a lively greeting. "Hello, beautiful! You're looking happy today. Business must be good?"

The barista just took her monthly wages without paying attention to how the coffee shop's business was going. Hearing this misplaced flattery, she waved a hand, not knowing whether to laugh or cry. "It's all right. Get to work now. When you come out I'll pour you a glass of ice water."

The young delivery man gave a joyful cry and wiped a sheen of sweat off his forehead. At the corner of his forehead, there was a small crescent moon-shaped scar, like a Justice Bao[2] with his prop stuck on crooked.

In the time it took the barista to make the customer's order, the delivery guy had cleared his manifest in one fell swoop and come to report back. He leaned on the counter waiting for water and

chattily asked, “Beautiful-jiejie, do you know what building Chengguang Mansion is in?”

“Chengguang Mansion?” The barista thought it sounded familiar, but she couldn’t quite remember, so she shook her head. “I’m not sure. Why?”

“Oh…” The young delivery man looked down and grabbed the back of his head. “No reason. I heard they were looking for delivery people.”

The barista wasn’t paying much attention and didn’t notice his uncertain little gestures. Putting a lid on the paper cup, she casually said, “I can ask around for you.—Your drink, sir. Careful, it’s hot.”

Maybe the coffee-buying customer had nothing to do. He looked at the young delivery guy and idly put in a few words. “Chengguang Mansion isn’t in a commercial building, it’s a private club out back. What, are they still looking for delivery people? Why don’t I take you there on my way?”

The barista finally noticed something was off and doubtfully looked at the young delivery man. “A private club?”

The young delivery man saw that his lie had been exposed, made a face, and, taking his cup of ice water and shipping manifest, ran off in a flash.

Out back of the brightly lit heart of the East District’s commercial center, there was a large swath of man-made greenery and landscape. A kilometer into it, you would find the deluxe residences of the elite strewn indistinctly throughout the heart of the landscape.—They had to build their residences here, because “solitude” itself wasn’t worth any money; it was only “finding peace in noisy surroundings” that was worth money.

All kinds of luxurious grounds of different degrees of style were arrayed fanning out from the landscape's perimeter. "Style" was the axis: the more expensive were further in, and the cheaper were forced out closer to the street.

Among them, the best, most expensive, most "stylish" piece of land was Chengguang Mansion.

This place's owner was not only rich; as pretensions to culture went, his achievements were profound. The little courtyard had been renovated in the style of the ancients. At a glance it looked like a protected Cultural and Historical Site. It had been completed not long ago, and in order to show it off the owner had invited a group of wealthy and estimable friends to come and have a look. Some came to socialize, some to discuss business, some simply to support their clique. There were quite a few who had sniffed out the event and had come to join in the fun, planning to use their faces and bodies as tickets. The parking lot was full luxury cars of every description, and a festive scene out of Vanity Fair had been set up.

When Fei Du strolled over, he had already finished his sticky sweet cup of coffee. He heard from far off the sound of music and voices in the courtyard. He tossed the paper cup into a trashcan by the road, then heard someone nearby give an off-key whistle. "President Fei, over here!"

Fei Du turned his head. Not far from him, he saw a group of people standing, all idle rich kids. Heading them was a very modish young man, dressed all in rags. This was one of Fei Du's drinking buddies, Zhang Donglai.

Fei Du walked over. "Making fun of me?"

"Who would dare to make fun of you?" Zhang Donglai openly slung

an arm around Fei Du's shoulders. "I saw your car was already here. I've been waiting for you forever, what were you doing? And what on earth are you wearing? Were you just signing a bilateral trade agreement with the President of the United States?"

Fei Du didn't even glance at him. "Piss off."

Zhang Donglai accordingly closed his mouth for a minute, pushing his endurance to its furthest point. "No way, this look of yours is too gauche. It's like bringing along someone's dad. How am I supposed to pick up chicks?"

Fei Du's steps paused briefly. He reached out a finger, hooked his glasses off, and casually hung them from Zhang Donglai's collar. Then he stripped off his suit jacket, rolled up the sleeves of his shirt, and started undoing buttons.

He unbuttoned four in a row, revealing a large portion of an indistinct tattoo on his chest, then messed up his hair. He picked up Zhang Donglai's paw, slipped off three large rings as crude as thimbles, and put them onto his own hand. "Will this do, son?"

Zhang Donglai considered himself a worldly person, but he was still dazzled by this stunning transformation.

Fei Du was the head of their group of rich kids, because the rest had their fathers looming over them and were still "crown princes." Young Master Fei meanwhile had lost his mother at a young age, and as soon as he had reached the age of majority, his father had gotten into a car crash and been left brain dead. Now he had "ascended the throne" ahead of schedule, putting him a grade above the others.

He had money and no one to mind him, so he had naturally become a fighter jet among this crowd of the sons of the wealthy.—

Fortunately he didn't have the hobby of playing the part of the "commercial genius." Ordinarily he went about things according to the rules, not going out of his way to make any wild investments. He simply stuck to the word "dissipation" and wasted his fortune, though it was a fortune that couldn't be wasted away in a short time.

Although recently he seemed to have eaten something funny. For a while he hadn't been going out to fool around. It seemed he meant to "wash his hands in a golden basin[3]."

Fei Du stuck his hands in his pockets and went a few steps ahead. "Actually, I'm only here as as a spectator today. I'll leave at midnight."

"Master Fei," said Zhang Donglai, "that's weak."

When a group of rich kids gets together, is leaving before the second half of the night any different from not having come at all?

Fei Du couldn't deny it.

Zhang Donglai asked, "Why?"

"I'm solemnly and earnestly pursuing a wife," Fei Du said carelessly. "Is it suitable to play around while I pursue? It doesn't show quality."

Zhang Donglai looked at his shirt and long hair blowing in the night wind. Aside from dissipation, he really couldn't think what other quality Fei Du might have. He quickly went after him and said, "You're crazy. Ignoring the whole lush forest to go after one old, poor…"

Fei Du suddenly turned his head and looked coldly at Zhang

Donglai.

There was something peculiarly contradictory about his manner. Smiling, he was full of flirtation, but as soon as his face turned serious, this keen, solemn feeling would seamlessly take over. His gaze was almost menacing.

Zhang Donglai's voice came to a halt. He stared blankly and didn't finish his sentence. He raised a hand and slapped his own face. "Bah, I was wrong. Another day I'll apologize to my sister-in-law face to face."

The term "sister-in-law" somehow seemed to soothe Fei Du. The corners of his mouth, which had been pulled tight, softened, and he waved his hand, as though "magnanimously" ripping out the page of what had just happened.

Zhang Donglai rolled his eyes to the heavens. He felt that His Majesty had been bewildered by a beautiful concubine and the future of the nation was in jeopardy.

Fei Du suited action to word. As soon as it hit midnight, like Cinderella hearing the clock strike, he promptly left the scene.

He passed through a whole crowd of ghosts and demons, avoided a moron raising a glass of champagne to toast him, and went into the woods to find Zhang Donglai.

Zhang Donglai was just discussing harmonious concerns of life with a beautiful young woman. Their discussion was in full swing, as if there was no one else around.

The moron drunkenly said, "You have it all now that your dad is dead. Master Fei, you really are the winner in life!"

“Thank you, my dad isn’t dead yet.” Fei Du nodded urbanely and looked over at Zhang Donglai. “Busy?”

Zhang Donglai was a rotten and shameless oaf. He whistled at Fei Du. “Master Fei, together?”

“No.” Fei Du’s steps didn’t stop. “If you see my sexy physique, you won’t be able to control yourself and go off early. That’d be very humiliating if it got out, right, beautiful? I’m going.”

Then, paying no attention to Zhang Donglai’s shouts, he quickly left by the gravel road. His steps were steady, not at all like someone who had been drinking half the night.

By the time he reached the parking lot, he had already buttoned up his shirt again. He very properly called a substitute driver and leaned against a big scholar tree to wait.

The beginning of summer in Yan City was always laced through with the scent of scholar tree flowers. It often bloomed out from a corner, almost indistinguishably faint. The exhaust of a passing car could mask it, but if left undisturbed to accumulate, it would arise once again on its own.

The distant music coming from the Chengguang Mansion mixed with raucous laughter and din. Fei Du narrowed his eyes and turned to look. He saw a group of young women playing games with a few pot-bellied and balding “veteran fresh meat” types.

Even though this was Nanping’s East District, at this hour most of the shops had already put up their shutters. The true gentlemen and the hypocrites had largely withdrawn before midnight after exchanging business cards to expand their social connections. Those that remained all had a tacit understanding that they were about to take part in the “lakes of wine and forests of meat[4]” portion of the

evening.

Fei Du plucked a small white flower off the tree, blew dust off it, then put it in his mouth and slowly chewed. Out of sheer boredom he opened his contacts. His finger hung over the name “Officer Tao” for a while. Then he suddenly noticed that it was very late and gave it up.

He stood quietly. With the sweet taste of the scholar tree flower in his mouth, he began to whistle, the whistle gradually becoming a tune.

Ten minutes later, the driver arrived and gingerly drove Young Master Fei’s clawed and fanged little sports car out onto Nanping Road.

Fei Du leaned back in the passenger’s seat, resting his eyes. An application on his phone played an audiobook. A man’s limpid voice read in an even tempo: “…*‘I have secret enemies,’ answered Julien.’*[5]…”

The substitute driver was a college student working part-time. He detested the world and its ways. He thought that if Fei Du wasn’t a debauched rich kid, then he was an overlooked eighteenth-rate minor celebrity. Suddenly hearing these words, he couldn’t help looking over at Fei Du in some astonishment.

Just then, a car appeared ahead with its distance lights turned on, nearly blinding the driver. He silently cursed, “Crazy!” and automatically turned the steering wheel away, watching the car blazing its “searchlights” brush past him as swift as the wind and as quick as lightning.

The driver’s eyes were still a little dazzled. He couldn’t see what kind of car it was, so he couldn’t pick a suitable criticism between

“you think you’re so great because you’re rich” and “if you don’t have the money to afford a better car you shouldn’t drive.” He felt rather disappointed. Then he heard the thump of something dropping and turned to look. It turned out that the phone loosely clutched in his employer’s hand had slipped and fallen.

The recording was going on: *“…‘But is the road less beautiful because there are thorns in the hedges which border it? Travelers go on their way, and leave the wicked thorns to wait in vain where they are.’…”*

Fei Du was asleep, dead to the world. So he had been using the recording as a cure for insomnia.

The driver looked away expressionlessly.

Tsk, so he *was* just a good-for-nothing. Golden on the outside but useless on the inside.

While the young driver indulged in his flight of fancy, he drove steadily along the straight Nanping Road, while the car that had just dazzled his eyes turned off its lights after they had gone by, noiselessly turned, and drove with familiar ease into the silent West District.

Nearing one in the morning, a streetlight that had flickered half the night at last died a natural death. A stray cat patrolling its domain jumped on top of a wall.

Suddenly, it howled, all the fur on its body bristling.

The weak moonlight fell on the ground, lighting a man’s face. He was sprawled on the ground. His face was so swollen with congested blood that it was almost impossible to tell what he had originally looked like. You could just see that there was a little crescent moon-shaped scar at the corner of his forehead. Stuck to

his forehead was a jaggedly torn piece of white paper, like a talisman to keep a corpse from walking.

He was stone dead.

The bristling stray cat was so startled it put a foot wrong and went slipping off the top of the low wall. It rolled and fled without looking back.

CHAPTER 2 - Julien I

Yan City's Central Bureau of Public Security, precisely 8:00 AM.

Each department's workers were arriving at their posts bit by bit. The administrative office's supply worker Xiao Sun[6] yawned and shouldered a new water barrel to deliver to the old Director-General's office. As soon as he opened the door, he found that Director Zhang had already steeped his first cup of tea and was just making a phone call, his expression stern.

Their old Director-General had passed his fifth decade. He was very lean, a fiery-tempered old antique. Wherever he went, he had to carry his own water to brew tea. He always carried an old-style dumb phone that could be charged once in half a month. He never wore civilian clothes to work, but in all four seasons alternated between a few uniforms. At the center of his forehead there was a deep crease, like the Erlang God's third eye: this was the gradual accumulation of his attitude of "everyone I see is displeasing"; if he smiled once, it was like an iron tree blossoming.

The sound from the office's elderly landline phone leaked out a little. Half-kneeling on the floor ripping open the water barrel's packaging, Xiao Sun could hear the person on the other end of the phone clamoring: "Sir, I know this thing happening now in my jurisdiction really shows a dereliction of duty on my part, but…"

Xiao Sun snuck a glance at Director Zhang's rarely parted brows and thought, *What's happened* now*?*

Yan City was just hosting a very important international conference. The leaders and reporters of every nation in the world were present; many business schools had taken off; all private vehicles in the city were restricted to alternate days; all the safety and security

branches were on high alert.

Xiao Sun saw the old Director-General starting to brew a storm from the neck up. Then he purposefully lowered his voice and said as mildly as possible, “North Nanping Road is less than three kilometers from the conference hall. I said before at the meeting that this month, no matter what, nothing could go wrong. It would be best if you could even clear away the roving vendors by the roadside. And here you’ve cooked up a homicide case for me. Lao Wang, you’ve ‘exceeded the quota’ in completing this mission!”

“But, sir, it was the middle of the night…”

“The notice to reinforce the nighttime patrols was sent to every unit a month in advance. So you also want to ask the offenders to keep to an eight-hour work day and then knock off?”

“Of course, of course, it’s not like I’m trying to shift responsibility, but you know, the West Flower Market District is always a mess, there are so many people coming in from outside…”

Director Zhang had restrained his temper going back and forth with the person in charge of the Flower Market District for five minutes. He found that not only did the other have no intention of examining his own conduct, he also had an excuse ready for everything. Director Zhang erupted in a rage; with no warning at all he burst out, howling with the ease of long experience: “Bullshit! Isn’t the West District your jurisdiction? Isn’t it your territory? You’re telling me now that it’s a mess? What the fuck have you been doing!”

Xiao Sun and the sub-bureau Director on the phone were both stunned silent as cicadas in winter by this howl.

Director Zhang picked up his cup and drank a mouthful of tea to

relieve his anger. He accidentally sipped some tea leaves and spat them back into the cup.

Then he extended a “finger of death” and typed the word “strangling” on the dust-covered keyboard. The screen was flooded with news screenshots from the internal network.

In the small hours of the morning, a male corpse that appeared to have died by violence had been discovered in a small alley in the West Flower Market District. Right away it had been taken as a novelty and posted online; though there were far more sensational things than this online, so at first it hadn’t made a splash. But the head of the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau had been afraid of anything going wrong at such a sensitive time and so had done something idiotic: wanting to quietly suppress this matter, he had first deleted the posts, then, trying to cover up after the fact, had made matters worse by saying that the body of a vagrant had been discovered, the cause of death unknown.

He hadn’t expected the little layabouts who’d first found the body to get busy. Having taken clear photographs of the crime scene, they used methods calculated to play to the crowd to broadcast them, reacting in direct proportion to the sub-bureau’s tight-lipped measures. City residents riding buses and subways during the morning rush hour were able to develop abundant associations from these photographs, fermenting this trifling business into a city-wide thunderstorm. Even the city government had called to make inquiries.

Director Zhang put on his reading glasses and clicked open the post that had had the most hits before it had been deleted. It was titled “Suspected Looting and Strangling Gang in the City,” clearly a description with mass appeal to public interest. There were pictures, and there were facts. As soon as he opened it, an entirely unpixelated photograph of the body walloped him from the screen.

Director Zhang: "…"

He felt that he had just howled too early, but he was advanced in years and couldn't attain a higher volume, so he had to resume an ordinary speaking voice. "I think your talents are wasted in our system here. I should send you to work for an advertising agency. Your propaganda skills are amazing."

"It's all that bunch of troublemaking whelps. Taking group pictures with a dead person! Don't you call that wicked? Sir, set your mind at ease, I've nabbed all of them, the photographs and posts are being deleted, I'll definitely be able to control this!"

Director Zhang leaned back in his chair, ceaselessly rubbing his brow. "The most important thing now is to hurry and solve the case. If there's a murderer, seize him. If there's a criminal, catch him. As for deleting posts…are you a webmaster? This has to be taken care of as soon as possible. Make sure your subordinates keep their mouths closed. I'll send over some people from the City Bureau to coach you through it. Wang Hongliang, if you haven't solved this case in a week, you can beat it!"

After telling off the sub-bureau director, Director Zhang hung up the phone. Xiao Sun quickly put the empty water barrel aside and got out his little notebook. He had a premonition that the old Director-General might have something to say.

Sure enough, Director Zhang gestured at him. "Go call the Main Criminal Investigation Team's people in."

Xiao Sun looked up. "Director Zhang, should I call all of them?"

Director Zhang muttered to himself for a moment, his glance falling on the LCD screen in front of him—the face of the body in the

photograph was swollen, the features warped, but you could still see that the face belonged to a young man. His mouth was open, and he seemed somewhat astonished, blankly facing the camera lens.

“Find Luo Wenzhou. Tell him to take some people over there himself,” said Director Zhang. “The case may not be very complicated. Tell him that by the end of the month I’ll have dealt with that Wang Hongliang. He’ll know what to do.”

Xiao Sun: “…”

Director Zhang’s gaze went around his reading glasses to look at him doubtfully.

“D-director Zhang.” Xiao Sun squeezed out a smile with difficulty. “Captain Luo… He, um. He hasn’t come in yet.”

Luo Wenzhou was an idler who came to work as regular as clockwork. As long as he wasn’t on duty, he would arrive precisely at 8:30. At 8:29, he absolutely couldn’t be found at his desk.

Today was a day his car was under the restriction. Luo Wenzhou didn’t want to crowd onto a bus, so he had simply gone to his basement and dug up a big old-fashioned bike fit to be put in a museum, fixed it up himself, and wobbled out onto the road.

His features were very handsome, handsome almost to the point of giving the impression of extreme youth, but from his bearing and manners it could be seen that he was a mature man. He was wearing headphones, and his shirtsleeves were rolled up. His well-fitted casual shirt intermittently revealed the outlines of his muscles. His legs were long enough to reach the ground even riding the tall old-fashioned bike. A bag of jianbing hung from the bike’s left handlebar, and from the right handlebar six or seven cups of

soy milk. With his hands loosely holding the severely overloaded handlebars, Luo Wenzhou sailed through the City Bureau's main gate precisely on time.

Just through the gate, Luo Wenzhou saw the guard blocking the way of a girl delivering flowers.

"You aren't allowed in—why aren't you allowed in? Miss, this is a Public Security Bureau, not Mount Huaguo[7], all right? All deliveries go to the mailroom to be put through a security check and be logged."

"How can you put fresh flowers in the mail room? They'll wilt, won't they." The flower delivery girl turned, looked at Luo Wenzhou and pointed. "You won't let me in, so why's the delivery guy allowed in?"

The guard: "…"

Luo Wenzhou looked up and gave the flower delivery girl a flirty white-toothed smile. "Because the delivery guy is incredibly handsome and surpassingly elegant."

The guard was deeply depressed about the City Bureau's image. "… Good morning, Captain Luo."

"Morning. Have you eaten? If you haven't, help yourself." Pushing his bike with one foot on the ground, Luo Wenzhou said, "Who are the flowers for, beautiful? I'll take them in for you."

The young lady delivering the flowers felt very flustered and scrambled to look at the card. "Oh… For the Main Criminal Investigation Team, for a gentleman called…called Tao Ran."

At precisely 8:30, Luo Wenzhou punctually came into the office and

threw the flowers onto Tao Ran's desk. "You little…"

He had gotten this far when the frustrated and exasperated Director Zhang sent someone to catch him. Luo Wenzhou had to hold back the rest of his speech. He leaned a hand heavily on Tao Ran's desk. "Just wait till I get back."

The whole Main Criminal Investigation Team was startled, simultaneously going dumb as wooden chickens and staring at the bouquet of fresh flowers in front of Officer Tao as if there was a time bomb buried at their stems.

Policewoman Lang Qiao got a magnifying glass and a pair of single-use gloves out of a drawer, then cautiously reached out towards the desk next to hers. She investigated the bouquet of flowers, then picked up a perfumed kraft-paper card.

With everyone's attention on her, her face solemn, this daring young woman opened the card. She saw written in tidy regular script: "The wind is strong, my hands and feet are frozen through, yet my heart is warm. But I don't know why, there is always a softness in my heart. I want to be beside you, just on the point of sadness[8]."

"It's signed 'Fei,'" said Lang Qiao. "Fei who?"

Tao Ran snatched it back. "Don't fool around. Give that to me."

"After all that fuss, it's just from your girlfriend. Here I was thinking Chief Luo was publicly confessing his feelings for you."

The group of colleagues surrounding them all relaxed, each calling out "I was so scared" one after another. Then, at the speed of light, this crowd of ruffians returned to combat readiness and divided up the breakfast Luo Wenzhou had brought, at the same time

dedicatedly carrying the banner of denouncing Tao Ran's "heresy."

"Deputy Tao, when did your resign? Did you write up a report? Did the association agree?"

"Taotao, you really are unfeeling and ungrateful."

"Deputy-Captain Tao, I only have 37.6 left of this month's wages, no money to buy dog food, but you'll have to do as you see fit."

"Go on, go on," said Tao Ran, putting away the card. Then he found an inconspicuous place to stash the flowers. "What girlfriend? Don't make a big deal over nothing."

Hearing that with such a great public proof of his crime as this revealing bouquet, this person still wanted to go away unpunished, everyone immediately flared into an uproar, planning to encircle and intercept Deputy-Captain Tao.

Just then, Luo Wenzhou, having rushed off, came in through the door once more and struck the doorframe. "There's been a homicide in the Flower Market District. A couple of you come with me to have a look, quickly."

CHAPTER 3 - Julien II

Nanping Road was a morning rush hour disaster area; the congestion lasted from six-thirty to ten.

All over the road, high-level white collar workers heading towards the East District's commercial center met and clashed with disorderly droves of motor scooters. If a slow-moving public bus had happened along and inserted itself into the fray, it might have manufactured the death trap of the century.

The roads in the West District were laid out especially intricately, some wide, some narrow, all jigsawed together. It was common practice among the local inhabitants to put up a mess of private construction; man-made dead ends were everywhere. Motor-vehicles that had mistakenly wandered in were like little bugs caught in a spider's web—they had to struggle for their lives, charging left and dodging right, if they wanted to see the light of day again.

Luo Wenzhou stuck his head out the car window and gave a blast on the siren. He yelled, "Handsome, we're conducting official business and can't get through. Could you move that BMW at your gate?"

At this, an old man came out of the yard of the single-story house beside the car, flattened his lips and looked at Luo Wenzhou, then totteringly pushed a mobility scooter into the yard.

On the left side of the mobility scooter was a sticker reading "Especially for picking up my grandson, "on the right one reading "The angrier you are, the slower I'll be." As it moved, a bark came from it. Luo Wenzhou raised his sunglasses from his nose bridge in surprise and looked down. A big yellow dog leapt out from behind

the scooter.

The big yellow dog sauntered up beside the police car, exchanged a glance with him, then brazenly lifted its back leg at the car's wheel.

Luo Wenzhou whistled at it. "Piss, little darling," he said kindly. "When you're done, I'll cut off your little willy, cook it into a pancake, and eat it."

This method of eating was truly novel; the big yellow dog had never heard of such a thing. It was struck with awe on the spot by Officer Luo's veteran hooligan attitude, let out a howl, and decamped with its tail between its legs.

Lang Qiao blocked her face with her tablet. "Chief Luo, have you noticed that there's an unmarried young lady in the backseat?—They've sent over what they currently have from the sub-bureau."

"Lady Comrade, please pick out the objective facts and summarize them for me." Luo Wenzhou slowly pushed the car out of the cleared-out narrow alley. "Ignore the subjective and groundless parts. That bastard Wang Hongliang is a bootlicker. The Flower Market District Sub-Bureau is rotten from the top down. It's all questionable goods."

"OK. The victim's name is He Zhongyi, male, eighteen years old, a worker from out of town. He was employed as a delivery man for a coffee shop chain. There are indentations on the body's neck, cause of death is asphyxiation…he was strangled. The preliminary conjecture is that the murder weapon was something like a piece of cloth. Time of death was between 8 PM and midnight last night. We have to wait for the medical examiner to get further before we get concrete determinations about the circumstances—oh, right, the body was discovered not far from the illegal shared rental the victim lived in, so his identity was confirmed quickly."

Luo Wenzhou was a very accomplished driver; boring his way through the peril-ridden alley with hardly a millimeter's clearance, he still had attention to spare to interrupt and ask, "Where did the rumors concerning the looting and strangling gang come from?"

"The victim was picked clean. His phone is gone, and his wallet was emptied and tossed aside, though there's no saying whether it was the murderer who did it." Lang Qiao quickly skimmed the e-mail. "Right, the person who reported the case said there was a piece of paper covering the body's face, with a strip of glue on it. It was stuck to the victim's hair. The character 'money' was written on it."

Tao Ran turned off the GPS. "Turn right ahead and we'll be there."

"OK." Luo Wenzhou knocked on the steering wheel. "This case is staying with the sub-bureau. It won't be transferred to the City Bureau. Do you know what we've come here to do?"

"To guide and supervise?" Lang Qiao asked tentatively.

"Do you know what kind of people 'guided and supervised' in the past?" said Luo Wenzhou.

Suddenly seeing the light, Lang Qiao said, "Court eunuchs!"

Tao Ran turned around in the passenger's seat to stare at her.

"Is that all the young ladies of your village are capable of?" Luo Wenzhou grimaced as though his teeth hurt. "Go on, I'm being serious here—Director Zhang is going to retire in a few years. Most of the Deputy-Directors are about in step with him. The remainder either have an inadequate service record or are like Director Ceng, keeping their heads buried in technical details and not paying attention to anyone. So when the time comes, it's likely people will

be pushed up from all the sub-bureaus."

Luo Wenzhou avoided a heap of garbage by the road. He lowered his voice. "The old Director-General wants to take that bit of goods Wang Hongliang down on his watch, so in the future the City Bureau doesn't end up in the grip of a mere wine sack and food bag —do you understand our main task?"

The police car had already turned at the intersection.

This was a very bleak piece of empty ground squeezed between an old-fashioned apartment building without private kitchens or toilets and a crowd of jagged single-story houses. It was right behind a little warehouse built by the locals. It was weed-choked and deserted, with water pooled in the corners that gave off a lingering and unusual stench.

The police had surrounded the scene. Medical examiners bustled in and out, investigating.

Wang Hongliang, the head of the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau, had come to oversee the scene himself in order to wait for Luo Wenzhou and the others.

He was a middle-aged man balding to the point that it had spread to his face; his anxious brows were so sparse their shape was almost indistinguishable. Warm sweat was trickling down his forehead. He personally welcomed Luo Wenzhou, grabbing his hand and shaking it up and down three times. "I've disturbed the City Bureau's leaders and even made some of you come all the way out here. I really feel very sorry."

Luo Wenzhou smiled pleasantly. "Lao-ge[9], why so formal?"

Though Wang Hongliang was sloppy at doing his job, he was a

master at cozying up to people. Hearing these words he quickly moved to take advantage, changing to a more familiar form of address. Moreover, he poured out an unceasing torrent of complaints to his newly-acknowledged brother.

Luo Wenzhou took out a pack of cigarettes, lit one, and passed it to Wang Hongliang. At the same time, he shot a look at Tao Ran to send him and Lang Qiao to take a look at the scene.

“It was someone he knew, it was absolutely someone he knew.” Wang Hongliang talked nonsense to Luo Wenzhou for about the time it took to smoke a cigarette and only then got down to business. His small eyeballs rolled wildly. “Look at this place. It’s so complicated that an outsider coming in wouldn’t be able to find his way around. If you fart in your own home, your neighbors will smell what you ate for lunch. How could an outsider dare to casually commit a murder? Luo-lao-di, you’re an expert, do you think that makes sense?”

At a sensitive time like this, what Wang Hongliang least wanted to see was a roving criminal mugging and killing people in his jurisdiction, so he was desperately sticking to “it was someone he knew, a private dispute.”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t pick up the thread of his conversation. He plucked off his sunglasses and hung them from his collar, narrowed his eyes, and looked at the the bustling medical examiners, then casually dodged. “I’m just the child of an official, in this to make a living. How could I pass myself off as an expert in front of you?”

“Who isn’t in this to make a living?” Wang Hongliang spread out his hands despairingly. “Let’s go. We’ll take a look, too.”

The newly-established Making a Living Club thereupon went side-by-side onto the scene. There was a young man with a crewcut and

glasses sending spit flying as he explained the situation to Tao Ran and Lang Qiao. This young man was very tall. His face was covered in acne. His posture was straight and stiff, like a coffin board cut into a human shape. His speech was dreadfully fast.

“This is our newly arrived Xiao Xiao, Xiao Haiyang,” Wang Hongliang introduced, pointing. “He was a brilliant student, got first on the written examination when he tested in. Xiao Xiao, this is the City Bureau’s Captain Luo.”

Xiao Haiyang subconsciously puffed out his chest and raised his head, like he was standing to attention. He clenched his lower jaw tightly, nodded stiffly at Luo Wenzhou and greeted him reticently: “Captain Luo.”

“No need to be polite,” said Luo Wenzhou, smiling at him. “Keep talking.”

It seemed that his words had pressed a button on the previously reticent Xiao Haiyang. In an instant, words came surging out of his mouth like a downpour, flooding all the people in front of him. “There were no defensive wounds on the victim’s body, but there was an injury on the back of his head made with a blunt instrument. Our preliminary judgement is that he was knocked out from behind, then asphyxiated with a piece of cloth. After death, his belongings were taken and a piece of paper was put on his head. Because the victim was unconscious while he was strangled, there were no signs of struggle left at the scene. The cord used to strangle the victim, the blunt object that caused the injury to his head, and so on, have not been found. At present there is no definitive evidence to show that this is the initial scene of the crime. Report complete!”

At first it was going fine, but when the last sentences came out of his mouth, Wang Hongliang’s face turned green at the sound. “If

there’s no evidence, then what are you talking nonsense for? If this isn’t the scene of the crime, then where is? Has the body been dumped? Why would someone want to dump a body here? What good would that be? Don’t confuse the matter with your random guesses!”

Xiao Haiyang looked at him in confusion. “I was only saying there's a possibility…”

Wang Honliang wanted to keep raging but was blocked by Luo Wenzhou. “Children who have just started work all have rather a lot of ideas. Listening to them can be pretty interesting.”

He looked around. The whole West Flower Market District had an overcast feeling. Confused and disordered power lines hung low overhead, cutting down one of Yan City’s rare sunny days to nothing. It was very depressing.

“Ask around, maybe someone heard something,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Besides that, I think Director Wang’s instinct is generally accurate. Let’s not consider extreme circumstances for now and direct the course of the investigation towards the crime being committed by an acquaintance. Lao-ge, does that work for you?”

Although Luo-lao-di’s arrival had been ill-omened, his style of speaking and doing business suited Wang Hongliang’s ideas. The two sides fit together, achieving a maximum savings on communications costs.

What came after would be endless investigation and interviews, which was all the work of the criminal police lackeys. It had nothing to do with the “coaches.” Their main task was to return to the sub-bureau office to sit and drink tea while they observed the progress of the work, waiting to grab Wang Hongliang’s pigtails.

But Tao Ran quietly said to Luo Wenzhou, “Chief, you go ahead. I want to stay and go around with them.”

Tao Ran’s name was gentle and refined[10]. His features were delicate. He never got angry with anyone, never used coarse language. With his colleagues and foes alike he was all life-giving spring breezes and rain. He seemed very good-natured, but Luo Wenzhou had worked alongside him since just after graduation, so he understood him only too well.

Tao Ran had a kind of earnestness and stubbornness incompatible with the current era. He didn’t care very much about other things—anyway, if the sky came falling down, there was Luo Wenzhou to hold it up—but while investigating a case, if there was anything suspicious, he would chase it down to the very end, whether it was his responsibility or not.

“The victim was knocked out from behind,” said Luo Wenzhou. “If it was a mugger, it wouldn’t have been worth it to strangle him. A private dispute is very likely. Wang Honliang’s basic judgement isn’t wrong—what’s the problem?”

The body had already been put into a body bag and removed by the medical examiners. Tao Ran softly said, “It’s the shoes—no one cleans up here. If you aren’t careful, you’ll step in mud. But I just opened the body bag to have a look. The child’s shoes are clean.”

Luo Wenzhou raised his eyebrows slightly.

“Of course, it’s possible that because the victim lived nearby, he was familiar with the area,” said Tao Ran. “But I think the sub-bureau’s Little Glasses was right. We can’t eliminate the possibility that this isn’t the initial crime scene. Besides, that piece of paper stuck to the victim’s head is strange. Wenzhou, what if this thing isn’t so simple? I’m worried Director Wang will be in a hurry to

cover it up and won't be willing to investigate properly."

"Is there any need to worry?" Luo Wenzhou sighed. "He obviously wants to cover it up."

As long as he had a likely suspect, Wang Hongliang could quickly use his official seal to put out a statement saying that this case had arisen from a private dispute, not some "strangling killer" like the alarmists on the internet were saying. If there were no other antics, after a few days people would get bored and forget about it. Once events had gone by, they could then say, "The Flower Market District's Director made an outstanding contribution towards the success of this city's such-and-such distinguished gathering."

As for the case, he'd find some errand-running little criminal policemen to slowly investigate. If they found something, they'd catch the criminal; if they didn't, they'd cover it up. After enough covering up, if it all came to nothing, they could leave the matter unresolved.

This was Wang Hongliang's style. Otherwise, Director Zhang wouldn't have specially sent Luo Wenzhou.

"A child came from far off to our city and died in a strange place among strangers," said Tao Ran. "It doesn't matter why. We owe him an answer."

Luo Wenzhou tilted his head and looked into his eyes for a couple of seconds.

Tao Ran quickly added another sentence. "So I feel uneasy and want to follow along. I promise no unexpected issues will arise."

Luo Wenzhou smiled. "Anyway, in all these years, I've taken responsibility for all the unexpected issues that have arisen for you,

and I haven't seen you pledge yourself to me in gratitude."

Tao Ran was unconcerned. He jokingly scolded, "Get out."

He turned to go, but Luo Wenzhou called him to a stop. "Wait. This morning, it was Fei Du who sent you the flowers, right?"

"Who else could it be?" said Tao Ran, carelessly.

Luo Wenzhou stuck his hands in his pockets and looked at his toes, seeming to be searching for the topic. "If I said to you, 'Stay away from that brat,' would you think I was meddling?"

"No, you don't really think he means it?" Tao Ran smiled. "He's always like this. He's just having fun. Never mind that I'm not gay, even if I was bent as a hoop…"

Luo Wenzhou lightly interrupted him. "Even if you were gay, should it be that little whelp dancing attendance on you?"

Tao Ran stared, but before he could pick out the feeling behind these words, Luo Wenzhou went on, "I'm not talking about his drinking and partying, and I'm not saying he's a weirdo… It's not on that level. Fei Du has just always given me a bad feeling, you know what I mean?"

"I know." Tao Ran nodded. He was thin and delicate and looked easy to bully. Because of this, he always wore his uniform to work. The morning sun coming over the low walls and the moss gently surrounded him with light. "I've been watching him for the last seven years. Fei Du is a good kid. You don't have to guard against him—though just now he's overcompensating, he's gone a little overboard…"

Luo Wenzhou didn't answer.

Tao Ran changed the subject. “Also, who was it back then who wanted to give him something and felt too uncomfortable to put his name to it and went to such great pains to get a handheld game console from abroad and made me…”

“Go away,” Luo Wenzhou interrupted him expressionlessly. “Shut up and get to work.”

CHAPTER 4 - Julien III

“I saw it on the news, too. I hear it was very close to us?”

“Across Nanping Road, then a little further on. When I go see my parents and don’t want to cross the bridge, I go around that way. I thought it was a mess before, but I didn’t expect…hey!”

The two office workers were too engrossed in slacking off and chatting in the tearoom to notice that there was someone standing behind them listening in. One office worker’s hand shook, nearly spilling the whole cup of hot water as a libation onto the floor.

“Careful.” Fei Du put his hand under the cup she was holding, took it from her, and put it aside. “Next time don’t pour such hot water. You have such tender hands, what if you burn yourself?”

Fei Du generally didn’t speak at all loudly, and everything he said seemed to be ordinary human speech. But passing through his mouth, human speech could at once turn into something with a covert feeling of intimacy. It often led people to form one-sided affections. Though fortunately he usually spoke and then left, leaving others ample time to destroy their own illusions.

“President Fei, you scared me!” At first the young office workers in the tearoom had been startled, but seeing it was him they quickly relaxed, because in comparison to the former Chairman Fei, who had been a man who'd always had the last word, Young Master Fei, rightful heir to all he possessed, was basically a charming mascot.

He wouldn’t bring the disgusting playboy habits of his private life into the office. Here, his display of “steadiness” was performed to satisfaction. Ordinarily he didn’t especially exercise his decision-making powers and didn’t take on many assignments. Even when

teasing the young ladies with a few stray words, he usually maintained a strong sense of propriety. Rigorously adhering to the principle that “the rabbit doesn’t eat next to its warren,” he didn’t overstep any bounds.

Fei Du used a paper towel to wipe away the spilled hot water, then handed the cup back. He casually asked, “What were you two just talking about?”

“We were talking about the West District across the way. Yesterday there was a mugging and killing, and it seems that the criminal hasn’t been caught yet. What if the HR department sends everyone an e-mail? To remind everyone to be extra careful on the way to and from work?”

“All right,” said Fei Du seriously. “And if that doesn’t work, we’ll just go on vacation and wait until the bad guy has been caught to come back. How could work be as important as your safety?”

The two girls clearly knew he was talking nonsense, but they were still overwhelmed with delight and went happily back to work.

After a while, Fei Du did indeed receive an e-mail from the HR department.

He poured about a half a cup of chocolate-hazelnut syrup into his coffee cup, planning to use the sugar to bind up every molecule of caffeine. He had nothing to do at the moment, so while he stirred he opened the streaming video attached to the e-mail.

“Late last night, behind this residential building in the city’s West Flower Market District, a violent crime occurred. At present, the police have yet to issue any official statement. Reports say that the victim Mr. He lived in an illegally shared apartment near the crime scene…”

The video came from an online news site widely known for its sensationalism. The prudish voiceover jabbered on for a couple of minutes, and then from outside the frame suddenly came a loud commotion.

The swaying camera, fearing to miss out on the action, quickly shifted its focus over to a small food stand.

A middle-aged lady wearing an apron, who may have been the food stand's owner, was just scowling and shoving a teenage boy. "Little whelp, can you not count, or has your conscience been chewed up by a dog? You'd even steal these few yuan? And once you've stolen them, what will you do? Take them home and buy your mother a coffin?"

Beside this scene, a handful of middle-aged and elderly people with nothing else to do were eating wontons at the food stand's illegally set out tables. This crowd's mouths were quite skilled; eating and drinking didn't hold up their pompous declarations. They voluntarily began explaining in the direction of the camera.

"You know, that little brat was buying a sesame bun? That lady told him to put the money there and take some change out of the change basket himself. Shouldn't he have some sense of responsibility? He gave her ten and tried to take fifteen out of the change box. I just saw it all."

"Eat five yuan's worth, and take five yuan into the bargain—that's great, not far from founding a family fortune."

"He should be beaten—when a young person steals trifles, won't he grow up to deal drugs and kill people? What about our law and order here? As soon as it gets dark, even the strapping young men don't dare to wander around outside. The way I see it, it's all the fault of these dregs of society coming in from out of town."

“How many times has this happened? And no one’s taken any notice. All right, won’t it be murder next time? What did I say?”

When a middle-aged and elderly cheerleading squad takes it into their heads to stir up trouble, the results won’t be insignificant. The conflict quickly intensified.

The food stand owner’s rage mounted to its height. She attacked. The teenage thief covered his head with both hands, curling into a ball. His neck and ears, red enough to drip blood, stuck out. He didn’t make a sound; he only dodged.

Just then, some onlookers who couldn’t stand to see any more of this attempted to separate the grappling stand owner from the teenager. Unexpectedly they also got pulled into the battle.

In an instant, the fight escalated, becoming an ideological battle between the West District’s original inhabitants and the out of town renters, both sides indiscriminately attacking each other’s character.

It was a complete mess. The camera was knocked askew three or four times. Fei Du finished stirring his coffee. He thought this battle of “three rats with four eyes” was extremely senseless; there was absolutely no entertainment value in watching it. He was just about to close the video.

Suddenly, someone in the video yelled, “The cops are coming!”

There was confusion, and a few uniformed people forced their way in to hurriedly part the crowd. They were immediately drowned in the ocean of citizenry. One young policeman even got his glasses knocked off.

Fei Du saw a familiar figure among them. His hand, poised to close

the window, paused.

After noon, at the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau, Wang Hongliang slipped away under the guise of “having a meeting.”

With his hands behind his back, Luo Wenzhou bent to get a close look at Tao Ran. “Last time when we went over to help the drug squad catch those drug traffickers, we had a twenty-minute shootout, and I don’t think anyone suffered such a ‘serious injury.’ I just knew it. The moment you guys are out of my sight, something is sure to go wrong. When we leave, don’t forget to stop by the hospital to get a rabies shot.”

Some unknown hero’s magic claws had left a scratch on Officer Tao’s chin.

The sub-bureau was in total chaos. The crowd that had taken part in the brawl had had its battle spirits raised; even after arriving at a Public Security Bureau they refused to lay down their arms. Mixed in among the cacophonous cursing and struggling, a handful of civil policemen whose vocabularies were clearly pitifully deficient kept saying “get down” and “behave” on repeat. Some extra pairs of hands brought in from the local police stations stood at a loss, lined up to one side, not knowing what to do.

When Luo Wenzhou came in, he slammed his hand heavily against the door, suppressing the two opposing armies with his even more overbearing manner. Everyone was startled by the thunderous sound and turned their heads to look at him.

Luo Wenzhou leaned against the doorframe. “Who here assaulted a police officer?”

No one spoke.

“You think if you don’t admit it, the law doesn’t apply to you?” Luo Wenzhou nodded. “All right, then, we’ll detain all of you. Don’t forget to notify your relatives to come and make bail. Those without relatives can contact their supervisors at work. I hear some of you were also involved in illegally occupying the road and participating in unlicensed business practices? Great, so you’ll all face severe penalties. I’ll have my colleagues at the police stations around here be especially attentive to those of you who have a criminal record.”

Before the words were fully out of his mouth, a middle-aged man around fifty years old blurted out, “Who are you saying has a criminal record? What do you mean we assaulted a police officer? Do you have evidence? You’re detaining us without evidence. Let me tell you, I have heart disease!”

Luo Wenzhou didn’t raise his voice or his eyelids. “Have you ever heard of a law enforcement body camera? Ignorant.”

Here Lang Qiao made a timely entrance and handed Luo Wenzhou a printed document. He took it and scanned it, then gave the middle-aged man leading the disturbance a meaningful look. “What a coincidence.”

Then he got out his phone and dialed a number. “Hello, Principal Han, this is Wenzhou… No, no, just puttering around—is there a security guard named Yu Lei at your school?”

The middle-aged man creating the disturbance stared, then the blood rushed out of his face. It really did look like a heart attack.

With the phone to his ear, Luo Wenzhou gave him a smile. “Please look into it. That’s ‘Yu’ with two bars and a hook, the ‘Lei’ that’s three stones[11], male, fifty-three—it’s nothing, this uncle is old in years but young in spirit. He’s been in a fight with some people. He

was arrested by my colleagues at a local police station. Now he's been arrested, he says he has heart disease. If he has a heart attack here and word gets out, won't that land us in it? We can't shoulder this responsibility. Auntie Han, I'm begging you, send someone to come over here quickly and pick up this high-risk insurance scammer."

"I…I-I-I did it to protect the safety of the neighborhood and my neighbors!" While Luo Wenzhou was still on the phone, the middle-aged man named Yu Lei was clearly panicking. "It was legitimate self-defense."

Luo Wenzhou was amused. "You know what 'legitimate self-defense' is?"

Yu Lei pointed at the few young men who stuck out like sore thumbs among the crowd. "It *was* self-defense. One of those people is the murderer who killed someone last night! I heard it!"

Luo Wenzhou: "…"

No one had expected a farce of law and order to inexplicably evolve into a series of separate interrogations.

All the criminal policemen out interviewing and investigating hurried back to quickly collect the witnesses' testimonies.

"According to that old hoodlum named Yu Lei, last night after he had turned off the lights and gone to bed, while he was half-sleep, he heard a fight. It was two men, speaking with out of town accents. The dialect was too heavy for him to understand what they were fighting about, but he sensed that they were people who knew each other." Lang Qiao pushed back her long hair. "We've confirmed it. This Yu Lei lives very close to the spot where the victim was found. The direct distance is less than fifty meters. He

lives in an apartment. With the back window open he should have been able to hear."

"What time?" said Luo Wenzhou.

"He's not sure, but he says he goes to bed around nine and doesn't usually have trouble with insomnia. If he was half-asleep…it shouldn't be after 9:30. That conforms with the estimated time of death. Besides that, there are some other people who live nearby who also say they faintly heard something, but there are often drunks getting into fights at night, so the neighbors are used to it. They didn't think anything of it, and they weren't about to go butting in to investigate."

"Chief Luo." Tao Ran, now with a bandaid on his chin, stuck his head in. "There's someone here you should come look at."

In the interview room, Xiao Haiyang, wearing glasses stuck together with clear tape, was sitting across from a skinny teenage boy.

"This child is named Ma Xiaowei," said Tao Ran. "He claims to be over eighteen, but I think he's still a minor. The brawl today started because he stole five yuan. He's the victim He Zhongyi's roommate, and likely the last person to see the victim."

Luo Wenzhou nodded, opened the door, and went in.

Ma Xiaowei quickly glanced up at him. Perhaps Captain Luo's aura was too fierce; the boy's face looked a little panic-stricken.

"It's all right," said Xiao Haiyang. "Keep talking."

Ma Xiaowei wrung his hands and spoke in a voice as thin as a mosqitoe's hum. "He…He Zhongyi comes from H Province, the same one of our roommates, although they aren't from the same

town. H Province is supposed to be pretty big. I think Zhongyi-ge's home town is more out of the way. He only came last year. He's pretty nice, outgoing, and he's a good roommate, cleans up regularly… He…he never had any trouble with anyone."

Xiao Haiyang asked, "Do you know if he has any other friends or relatives here?"

Ma Xiaowei's chin sank, then he thought of something and quickly shook his head. "I…I don't know, I've never seen anyone."

Luo Wenzhou cut in: "Where were you between eight and ten last night?"

Ma Xiaowei's throat moved. Again he didn't dare to look at Luo Wenzhou. He quietly said, "At…at home."

"What were you doing at home?"

"N-nothing, just…watching TV."

"Alone?" asked Luo Wenzhou.

Ma Xiaowei only then seemed to notice what he was getting at. His expression changed.

"It's all right, darling." Luo Wenzhou pulled up a chair, sat down in front of Ma Xiaowei, and smiled kindly. "We're from the serious crimes division. We're only responsible for major criminal cases. You won't be punished for attempting to steal five yuan. Don't be nervous."

Ma Xiaowei almost couldn't sit still.

Luo Wenzhou's tone changed at once. "Although I think that if you

steal repeatedly without mending your ways, you can still be penalized even without stealing a significant amount. This isn't your first time, right?"

Ma Xiaowei stiffened at once, his sickly pale face going blank.

Luo Wenzhou lightly knocked on the table. "You were at home alone watching TV? Where were the people who live with you?"

"He Zhongyi came home after work last night, changed his clothes, and left. Zhao-ge…the one who's from the same province as Zhongyi, he's gone back home for a few days to attend a family funeral. There are a few others who went out to find people to play Mahjong with, so…so I was on my own, but I didn't…it wasn't…"

"I didn't say it was you," said Luo Wenzhou, interrupting his rambling defense. "There were some residents who heard an argument happening near the scene of the crime around that time. Given how close your house is to the scene, you would have heard. Did you hear anything then?"

Ma Xiaowei bit his lip hard.

"If you heard something, say you heard something. If you didn't, say you didn't. Does the question need this much thought?"

"M-maybe I heard a little, the TV was on pretty…"

"Around when did you hear it?" said Luo Wenzhou.

"Quarter past nine," Ma Xiaowei blurted out.

As soon as the words were out of his mouth, Xiao Haiyang, taking notes with his head down, and Tao Ran, listening in from the door, both looked at him.

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes. “Didn’t you just say you ‘maybe heard a little?’ Then how come you remember the time so precisely now?”

Ma Xiaowei said nothing.

“Xiao Ma, tell the truth,” Tao Ran said gently. “How do you know it was a quarter past nine? Did you actually hear something, or were you near the scene of the crime at the time? What do you know?”

Not giving Ma Xiaowei time to react, Luo Wenzhou immediately added, “If you don’t explain yourself clearly today, you could be under heavy suspicion of having committed the crime!”

“I believe it wasn’t you,” said Tao Ran, playing the good cop to his bad cop. “If you didn’t do it, then there’s no need to be scared. If you know something, then say it. This is a homicide case. I think you understand the severity?”

Ma Xiaowei instinctively turned an appealing gaze on him.

Luo Wenzhou struck the table. “Who are you looking at? I’m telling you to account for yourself!”

“It wasn’t me… I…I heard.” Ma Xiaowei was about to cry. “At a quarter past nine, I heard people arguing downstairs. The voices sounded familiar, so I wanted to go down and look…”

“What did you see?”

“Nothing.” Ma Xiaowei’s eyes opened wide. “I didn’t see anybody, not even a shadow, as if what I’d just heard had been an illusion. And…and the streetlight was broken, I…I…”

Luo Wenzhou snorted. “Kid, is this a ghost story you’re telling us?”

The rims of Ma Xiaowei’s eyes were red. As he looked fearfully at Luo Wenzhou, the blood vessels crawled bit by bit over his eyeballs.

They questioned him repeatedly, until it was near evening and time to get off work, and Ma Xiaowei was near collapse, but the boy didn’t cough up anything else of use. He just told the same inferior late-night ghost story over and over again.

“I don’t think it was him,” said Lang Qiao, coming out of the sub-bureau. “This kid’s psychological quality is unsound. He’ll say anything once he’s scared. If there really was something, he couldn’t have held out long with all of us questioning him… although the bit about the haunting is pretty strange.”

Luo Wenzhou made an uncertain sound.

“What is it?” said Tao Ran.

“That’s not for sure,” said Luo Wenzhou. “It could be he’s only telling a part of the truth. I think he’s still holding something else back—let’s talk about it tomorrow. Where are you two headed, back to the City Bureau first or…”

His speech was interrupted by a whistle.

The three-person team of Court Supervisors[12] looked up and saw a big SUV at least two meters tall parked by the side of the road. There was someone leaning against the car. “You’ve had a hard day, Officer Tao. Could I take you home?”

CHAPTER 5 - Julien IV

This person was lanky, dressed in a black button-down shirt and a pair of crisply-pressed pants. He had his hands stuck in his pockets and his legs stretched out and loosely crossed in front of him. His hair fell to his shoulders. If anyone met his gaze, two cupped smiles would pool in his wandering eyes, like an indiscriminate free broadcast.

Lang Qiao had reached her present age without ever once having seen a man who would come on purpose to the door of a Public Security Bureau to preen. “Deputy Tao, is that your friend?”

Tao Ran’s teeth seemed to be hurting.

Lang Qiao was very sensitive. She noticed at once that there was something wrong with the atmosphere and asked curiously, “What is it?”

Tao Ran was just about to go over and say something when Luo Wenzhou, who had been silent until now, suddenly reached out and grabbed his elbow. He raised his chin at the newcomer. “Fei Du, what are you doing here?”

Fei Du gathered up his long legs and raised his eyelids to look at Luo Wenzhou. “Oh, I’m sorry. I didn’t realize this place had your name on it.”

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes expressionlessly. Fei Du gave him a smile that wasn’t quite a smile. Lang Qiao, who had no idea what was going on, cluelessly picked up a trace of swords-out-bows-bent murderous energy.

After a moment, Fei Du smiled like he was asking for a beating. He

was the first to look away. Turning to Tao Ran, he said, “Tao Ran, get in the car. If I stay here any longer, Captain Luo will give me a ticket.”

Tao Ran didn’t have a chance to answer before Luo Wenzhou interrupted coolly: “Did I say we were finished working? The two of you come back with me to the City Bureau right now. We have to report our progress to Director Zhang as soon as possible, and hold a conference concerning the facts of the case.”

Lang Qiao: “…”

Didn’t you just say “let’s talk about it tomorrow?”

Fei Du sighed languidly. “Superiors going through menopause truly are one of this world’s calamities. How about this: Tao-ge and this lovely policewoman can ride in my car. I’ll take you back to the City Bureau. You’ve had a hard day, you may as well ride in a car where you can stretch your legs.”

“You mind cars that aren’t spacious? President Fei, I advise you not to experience riding in a police transport. I guarantee you wouldn’t even be able to stretch your arms.”

“Thank you for the warning, sir.—Tao Ran, I’ve made a reservation at a Western restaurant near your office. Even if you have to work overtime, you still have to eat first, right?”

“Public servants don’t eat. The murderer hasn’t been caught. How could we have the face to eat?”

Lang Qiao still hadn’t worked out whom she had offended.

Tao Ran, who had been unable to get a word in edgewise, could finally stand it no longer. “Enough! Are you two finished?”

Luo Wenzhou laughed grimly and turned to go. “Come on—Lang Big-eyes, what are you looking at? If you want to look at pretty boys, you can go home and do it on your own time. Don’t waste time at work!”

“Tsk. Beauty, why don’t you consider coming to work for my company instead?” Fei Du tilted his head at Lang Qiao in the manner of a domineering director-general. “It's a waste of the bounty of nature for you to be a cop. I’ll give you five times your current salary.”

Tao Ran turned and glared at him. “You knock it off, too!”

Fei Du looked directly at him and nodded in an exceedingly “obedient” way, but then of course he lobbed another attack. “All right. For your sake.”

“Tao Ran,” said Luo Wenzhou, “what are you still dawdling for!”

He couldn’t offend either of these lordly show-offs, so Officer Tao rolled his eyes at the innocent night sky and quickly went after Luo Wenzhou.

After a few steps he subconsciously looked back. As was to be expected, he saw that Fei Du hadn’t moved. He was standing in place, watching him go. Seeing Tao Ran look back, Fei Du, who seemed to have been ready for this, smiled swiftly, pressed two fingers to his lips, and lightly flicked them towards Tao Ran.

Tao Ran: “…”

If international society awarded prizes for flirtation, Young Master Fei might already have received a Nobel.

On the way back, Luo Wenzhou turned the police car into the Chang'e 3 spacecraft, racing helter-skelter until he reached the City Bureau. The big SUV, which seemed clumsily heavy, stuck to their tail the whole time, leisurely and carefree.

Lang Qiao had resisted for ages, but she finally couldn't resist saying something. "Who is that piece of fresh meat? His driving is pretty slick."

Tao Ran turned to give her a veiled look, warning her to leave well enough alone, but it was already too late.

Luo Wenzhou looked in the rearview mirror and saw Fei Du stop his car at the City Bureau's gate. He immediately called the Main Traffic Police Team next door. "There's a car parked at our gate in violation of traffic regulations. Go over there and give him a ticket. The brat's got money, give him a few."

After a while, a young traffic cop returned his call in trepidation. "Captain Luo, I gave him a ticket. I told him, 'You're parked in violation of the regulations. The fine is two hundred yuan.'"

"What happened?" said Luo Wenzhou.

The young traffic cop said, "Well, he gave me a thousand and said he was going to park for another eight-hundred yuan's worth."

Luo Wenzhou: "…"

Lang Qiao looked at him cautiously. "Chief, are we still having a meeting?"

"Obviously!" said Luo Wenzhou.

But Luo Wenzhou couldn't hold Tao Ran up forever. The outcome

of their day's work had been perfectly clear. There really wasn't any overtime worth working.

Fei Du folded the traffic ticket into a little boat, turned on the air-conditioning, and leaned comfortably back in his seat. Calm under pressure, he put an English song on repeat on the car's stereo system. When it had looped eight times, Tao Ran came out.

Tao Ran wasn't an especially fastidious person. An old briefcase hung over his shoulder, his hair was a mess, and his leather shoes hadn't been shined in days. There was a bandaid on his chin, and his face showed traces of frustrated weariness. He really didn't look anything like a beauty who would bring calamity. He came up and knocked on the window of Fei Du's car. "Are you still here?"

When Fei Du rolled down the car window, the sound of the looping "You Raise Me Up" struggled impatiently out through the crack, flapped out into the night, and scattered melodiously.

Tao Ran's expression somehow changed when he heard this song, but before he could say anything, Fei Du turned off the stereo as though nothing was the matter.

"A video of you guys trying to break up a fight showed up online. I just happened to see it." Fei Du got out of the car and pointed to the bandaid on Tao Ran's chin. "I was worried about you. Are you all right?"

Tao Ran laughed bitterly. Dealing with ten mass brawls still wouldn't be as fatiguing as getting caught between Luo Wenzhou and Fei Du.

"Fine. Next time I'll keep a distance from that menopause sufferer, does that work?" Fei Du took Tao Ran's bag. "Do you want to drive or ride?"

“Excuse you, that ‘menopause sufferer’ graduated the same year I did.” Tao Ran opened the car door and got in the driver’s seat. “Why’ve you changed your car again?”

“Didn’t you say the last few were too flashy?” Fei Du casually went around to the passenger’s seat. “So I bought another one. This one is cheap and steady. From now on I’ll use it especially to come pick you up.”

Tao Ran’s hand paused in the middle of buckling his seatbelt. He looked at Fei Du and said sternly, “If only I’d made a little more money, worked a little less, and found myself a wife early, my children might be walking by now.”

“I know.” Fei Du rested his elbow on the car window ledge, tilted his head, and smiled at him. “Just look at those kids who go running after celebrities. They do nothing but waste time and money all day. They don’t even have a goal. They’re just trying to make themselves happy. Treating you well is the greatest source of enjoyment to me. You’ve been so good to me all these years, so I take it you must be able to put up with me.”

Tao Ran: “…”

“Tao Ran, come have dinner with me.”

“I feel full just looking at you.” Tao Ran freed one hand and laid it on top of Fei Du’s head. “Who are you calling ‘Tao Ran?’ Show some respect for your elders.”

“I…” Tender words came to Fei Du’s lips, but then he suddenly changed his tune. “What the hell is that!”

Officer Tao Ran’s unadorned satchel had probably been

manufactured back during the Qing Dynasty. It was truly decrepit. When it had been zipped closed, the zipper often separated on its own according to its mood. Fei Du hadn't noticed; neither could he tell apart the top and bottom of the ratty bag. He'd accidentally turned it upside down, sending a folder spilling out. A number of photographs scattered over his lap. In the dim light, the corpse's face looked unusually ferocious.

Fei Du at once sucked in a breath. If he hadn't been held down by the seatbelt, he would nearly have leapt to his feet. "Is that person dead? How come it looks so bad?"

"Those are important materials. Don't mess around, hurry and pick them up."

Fei Du held his neck stiffly straight, firmly refusing to look down and meet the dead person's eyes. "N-no, blood makes me sick."

"There's no blood." Tao Ran sighed with fatigue. "You aren't even scared of that ghost-botherer Luo Wenzhou, but you're scared of dead people?"

Fei Du was fumbling around trying to get the scattered photographs and materials back into the file, screening his eyes with one hand. He cautiously took a peek, saw that there really wasn't any blood, then relaxed slightly. Pinching the edges of the scattered materials one by one as if he was clearing a minefield, he returned them to their original position.

This arduous task made Fei Du behave for five minutes. After a while, he asked, "Murder?"

"Yes," said Tao Ran. "But we're still investigating, so I can't disclose the details of the case."

“I see,” said Fei Du. He didn’t ask again. Having restored the contents of the folder, he put it back and examined the bag’s broken zipper by the weak light. “Poor guy,” he said casually.

“Hm?”

“He went to see someone, full of yearning, not expecting that that person would prefer him dead.” Having sized up the zipper, Fei Du began to tinker.

Tao Ran stared. “How’s that?”

“Well,” said Fei Du, “you took the photographs of the victim’s jacket yourselves, right? The tag hasn’t been cut off.”

“We’ve already looked into that. It was bought at a little shop nearby. The shop owner and the surveillance cameras confirm that the victim really did buy it himself.”

“I’m not saying the murderer put it on him. Who’d kill someone, then throw in a jacket?” Fei Du smiled. “If he put the jacket on without cutting off the tag, then it’s possible the price was rather high. It exceeded his level of consumption. But he had to wear it for some occasion, so he was going to wear it once and then return it. Students who aren’t very well off do that when they’re just starting out going to interviews. Was he a lefty?”

Tao Ran paused. He had gone to look at He Zhongyi’s apartment. He quickly reviewed where everything had been placed. “No.”

Fei Du shrugged. “The signs of wear and tear on the left shoe are clear—of course, some people’s dominant hand and foot aren’t on the same side, but I think the greater likelihood is that he borrowed these shoes.”

But according to the school security guard's evidence, the person He Zhongyi had met before his death had been a man he was acquainted with, someone from the same province as him, possibly even a relative—otherwise they wouldn't have been speaking in dialect.

They reached their destination, and Tao Ran stopped the car. "You mean…the victim went out of his way to get dressed up before he died. So the person he met was probably a woman?"

"Not necessarily. Although he went to the effort of borrowing clothes and shoes, his outfit tends more towards the formal and reserved. To me it looks more like he was going to a job interview or to see someone he greatly revered. If he *was* going to see a girl, someone would have been making a formal introduction." Fei Du opened and closed the zipper of the old briefcase and tugged at it gently. It didn't come apart. He handed the bag to Tao Ran. "The zipper came loose. I've tightened it up for you.—For example, if I was going to see you, I wouldn't wear a three piece suit. I'd just spray on a little extra cologne."

Fei Du's eyes weren't entirely black. Their color was a little light and looked especially multifaceted in the dimness. When he looked fixedly at someone, his eyes always seemed to be speaking, making the other person sink into them in spite of themselves.

Unfortunately, Deputy-Captain Tao was blind.

He only very seriously considered Fei Du's words for a moment, then thoughtfully asked, "So if someone kills a person and then sticks a piece of paper to his forehead, what do you think that means?"

Fei Du dully redirected his gaze. "Maybe it was to keep the corpse from rising."

Tao Ran: "…"

"Or maybe the killer felt regret after killing him and subconsciously mimicked the behavior of others displaying respect and sadness towards the dead."

Tao Ran thought about it, then followed up: "What if it wasn't covering his whole face? What if, for example, it was just a little strip, stuck onto the victim's hair, just covering a little piece of his face from the forehead to the eyes."

"The forehead? When elders are scolding a child, people in power are bullying the weak, or someone is punishing a pet…they'll all hit the forehead—or it could be meant to represent a label, the kind you stick on something you're selling on the market. What was written on the paper?"

"'Money.'"

Fei Du raised his eyebrows. His long brows slanted until they almost met his temples, looking sternly handsome.

"What's wrong?"

"I don't know. One word is too little. It's easy to overanalyze and go astray." Fei Du smiled. "Tao Ran, we're at your house."

Tao Ran came back to himself, just noticing that he had gone overboard with the discussion. He opened the car door and was just about to get out. Then he suddenly remembered something and turned back. "Have you eaten? Come up and wait a bit, I'll make you a bowl of wontons."

Fei Du clearly froze. Then his gaze became liquid. "You're inviting

me home? You aren't worried that's moving too fast?"

Though the words were very suggestive, he sat in the car without moving.

"If you don't want to come, then say so. You won't miss the meal, anyway." Holding the car door, Tao Ran leaned over slightly. "Hold out your hand."

Bewildered, Fei Du held out his hand. Tao Ran got something out and put it into the palm of his hand. "When you want to throw yourself into the ocean, the best thing to do is to dress accordingly and swim a couple of laps yourself, not stay on the sidelines clutching a life buoy and paddling your feet.—You don't want to turn me gay at all. Stop making trouble. I'm going home. Drive safely."

Fei Du silently watched him walk into the rather old-fashioned apartment building, then looked down at what Tao Ran had given him. It was the card from the flowers he had sent that morning, the smell of cologne still lingering on it, and a handful of milk candy.

The milk candies were an old brand. After several years of not seeing it on the market, Fei Du had figured that the factory had closed. He didn't known where Tao Ran could have gotten these from…

Possibly they were left over from earlier and expired. You couldn't see the manufacturing date on loose goods.

Fei Du unwrapped one and ate it—it was an old, cheap product. The texture was coarse, and it stuck to his teeth; fortunately it was sweet enough.

He turned on the stereo, letting the song that had made Tao Ran

frown when he'd heard it play on an endless loop again. He sat quietly for a while.

When he had eaten all the candy, he got up to switch to the driver's seat. As soon as he moved, he found that there was still a photograph left in the car.

It was a very small ID picture that had fallen into the crack between the seats. He hadn't seen it when he'd been cleaning up.

Fei Du turned on the interior car light and picked up the victim's ID photograph. Unlike the ferocious corpse, this photograph clearly showed the victim's features.

With his attention fixed on the moon-shaped scar on the forehead of the young man in the photograph, Fei Du slowly frowned.

CHAPTER 6 - Julien V

First thing next morning, Luo Wenzhou went back to the City Bureau to have a chat with Director Zhang, then headed over to the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau with Tao Ran. They had just parked their car when Lang Qiao, who had arrived earlier, came out to meet them.

Lang Qiao passed over two cups of coffee and quietly said, “Where have you been? They’ve arrested Ma Xiaowei. They identified him as a major suspect and stuffed him into a police car and brought him back here first thing this morning, with the online media following the car the whole way. They’ve just been dispersed.”

Hearing this, Tao Ran was instantly alarmed. “What!”

Luo Wenzhou put a hand on his shoulder. “Was it according to procedure?”

Lang Qiao sighed and said almost inaudibly, “Captain Luo, with that Wang Hongliang keeping watch, that kind of slip is impossible.”

“What’s the evidence?” asked Luo Wenzhou heavily.

“The cell phone,” said Lang Qiao quickly. “It’s particularly fishy. The deceased He Zhongyi’s phone was found on his roommate Ma Xiaowei—the official word is that the person in charge of the case at the sub-bureau received a report last night, saying Ma Xiaowei had been seen with a new phone that looked like the one the victim He Zhongyi had lost. The sub-bureau quickly dispatched people to summon Ma Xiaowei for questioning. They found the phone, and turned up both Ma Xiaowei and the victim’s fingerprints on it.”

Luo Wenzhou frowned.

Tao Ran got right to the heart of the matter. “Who reported it? How could the informer tell it was He Zhongyi’s phone that Ma Xiaowei had?”

“Apparently the phone was a just released new model, and a very expensive brand. Very few people have them here. It seems that a relative gave it to He Zhongyi. Everyone saw when he first got it. It made a strong impression.”

“Who reported it and why isn’t important. Even if Wang Hongliang and his people went charging in and forcibly searched the place, they can always produce a trumped-up informer after the fact.” Luo Wenzhou waved a hand. “The crux of the matter is the phone. Having the victim’s phone doesn’t mean that Ma Xiaowei is the murderer. It’s not very compelling as evidence goes.—Did Ma Xiaowei also say something he shouldn’t have? Did someone use force to extract a confession from him?”

“You’ve guessed it.” Lang Qiao glanced around like a thief and only went on when she saw no one was around. “I don’t think it went as far as using force. The whelp wanted to go to work early, so he lied about his age. I had someone look into it last night. His ID had been altered. He just turned sixteen. I figure he’ll say anything if he’s frightened. They asked him where the phone came from, he stalled for a while and then said he picked it up.”

“He picked it up at the scene of the crime.” Luo Wenzhou shook his head. “Did they also ask when he picked it up? Did he also say it was around a quarter past nine, when he heard the sound of arguing downstairs and went to investigate?”

Lang Qiao spread her hands.

At the time pointed out by the other witnesses' circumstantial evidence, he said he'd gone to the crime scene and "picked up" the phone.

Who was the murderer?

I didn't see.

Words failed Luo Wenzhou. He stroked his chin heavily. "I haven't seen such a candid 'murderer' in years."

Before Lang Qiao could respond, Wang Hongliang boisterously came over to them. "I went to a district safety and security assembly yesterday, so I was absent for a bit. I just got back and heard my subordinates say the suspect had already been caught? The City Bureau's young leaders are so dedicated to their work. Get a load of that efficiency!"

Luo Wenzhou's somewhat gloomy expression warmed forcibly. He gave Wang Hongliang an unassailable smile. "Wang-dage[13], you're pretending to be polite. In your heart I'm sure you're thinking we're snatching the credit away from you."

Wang Hongliang grinned hugely, his two big front teeth protruding toweringly from between his lips. "It's all in the service of the people. Where does credit come into it?"

These pompous words had just come out of his mouth when Lang Qiao butted in. "Director Wang, I think the chain of evidence still isn't complete? The murder weapon hasn't been found, and Ma Xiaowei hasn't confessed. There are still a lot of suspicious aspects here. Do you suppose there's any follow-up work you need our help with?"

Lang Qiao was a genuine article "big-eyed lamp"; she had

undergone the personal appraisal of City Bureau's forensic expert Ceng Guangling—according to him, her eyes were even bigger than those of "Xiao Yanzi[14]" in the television drama. To guard against developing wrinkles around them, Lang Qiao didn't smile rashly. When special occasions called for a smile, she usually stiffened her eyes and only moved her mouth. Over time, she had developed a skillful false smile. While she was essentially a fool, this smile made her look lofty and elegant.

Ordinarily, when interrogating criminals, she could multitask, playing the strict parent and other such evil characters without any affectation.

Lang Qiao had used the word "help," but her tone of voice was so powerful she seemed to be telling someone off. At the same time, her flesh-crawlingly large eyes were fixed coldly on Wang Hongliang, utterly routing Director Wang's "in the service of the people" big front teeth and sending them back into his mouth like a turtle retreating into its shell.

With an altered expression, Wang Hongliang said, "Xiao Lang, what do you mean?"

"Hey, Xiao Qiao'er, how can you be so awkward?" Luo Wenzhou moved Lang Qiao behind him, chiding, then looked loftily down upon Wang Hongliang. He offered a false friendly smile. "Director Wang, we didn't help at all before. If there's any use for us in the follow-up, go ahead and instruct us."

Wang Hongliang was full of misgivings but couldn't afford to openly quarrel with him, so he pretended not to understand any of this. He groaned, then turned and walked away.

Lang Qiao put her hands on her waist and shot a look at Wang Hongliang's retreating figure. "I've heard the reports on him would

fill up a shoebox. How can he still be so cocky?"

Luo Wenzhou put a cigarette in his mouth and shot her a look. "Aren't you afraid that if we don't manage to get him dismissed this time, he'll make things uncomfortable for you in the future?"

"Ha!" Lang Qiao rolled her eyes. "Big deal. I'll quit and get by on my looks."

"A young woman shouldn't be so shameless." The smile on Luo Wenzhou's face crumbled away. He went on, "This Ma Xiaowei may be the murderer, or he may just be stupid. I personally incline towards the latter, because if I'd killed someone, I'd definitely have thought of a plausible story. Even if I just said I was 'at home watching TV and didn't hear anything,' it would still be better than telling ghost stories to the police. Up to now, the crime scene hasn't turned up a single trace of the murderer. This person is bold but cautious, cool and ruthless. He's clearly taken precautions against being discovered. I don't believe he can be this mentally deficient."

"I also think it isn't him." In a few words, Tao Ran repeated what Fei Du had said in the car the night before. "So it seems we should still be looking into He Zhongyi's personal relationships. For example, who actually gave him that phone? Perhaps we can ask the person who lent him the shoes."

Luo Wenzhou listened and gave a "wow," then hesitantly said, "You're saying his shoes were borrowed? That notion is kind of…"

"It isn't my notion."

First Luo Wenzhou froze. Then, as if his and Tao Ran's hearts were beating in unison, he instantly understood the implication behind his words. His brow swiftly creased. "Fei Du? I told you it's best not to get him involved in these things."

“I know. Yesterday was an accident.” Tao Ran briefly cut this topic short and asked, “What do you think of that line of thought?”

“Pretty good. We’ll try looking into those shoes,” Luo Wenzhou pronounced. “Tao Ran, continue following up on the case. Lang Qiao, keep an eye on the team questioning Ma Xiaowei. There’s still a lot of suspicious points about him. I think he knows something else. Besides that, take some precautions against Wang Hongliang and company’s little maneuvers. I’ll go oversee Fatty Wang for you. If you need anything, call me any time.—Let’s go, beautiful people. Today we’re working overtime without overtime pay.”

Lang Qiao had accumulated a mountain of curiosity in her heart. When Luo Wenzhou had gone, she trotted after Tao Ran. “Deputy Tao, just who was that guy yesterday? Why did Chief Luo say not to let him touch the case?”

“Of course it’s not right for him to touch it,” said Tao Ran. “He isn’t a cop.”

Lang Qiao didn’t let him off. “Then why did the chief agree so quickly after hearing it was his idea? Is he Detective Conan?”

Tao Ran sighed and turned to look at her. Lang Qiao forced her already very potent eyes open even wider and flashed her gaze at him.

“Blinking gives you wrinkles,” said Tao Ran.

Lang Qiao quickly used her fingers to prop up the corners of her eyes and her forehead.

Tao Ran paused, then simply said, “In a case Wenzhou and I once handled, Fei Du was…the one who reported it. This was seven years

ago.”

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran had just graduated then. They were callow youths, unsteady in their work. Especially Luo Wenzhou. He was the child of a government official and had been very arrogant when he was young, insubordinate and displeased with everything. He thought he was overflowing with talent, Number One in the world—Number Two being an English fellow named Sherlock Holmes.

He didn’t think he was going to work every day, he thought he was going out to save the galaxy. His handling of affairs was highly unreliable. When he was just starting out on low-level field assignments, if he was sent out to reconcile a community dispute, he could easily reconcile it into a battle.

That afternoon, there was a band of robbers roaming around who needed to be caught. All over, police reacted. The City Bureau, every sub-bureau, and even the local police stations sent people over. Only the youthful Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran, who had been judged by their elders as likely to do more harm than good, were left on duty.

“110[15] got in contact and said a child had called in a case in their jurisdiction. He’d gone home from school for the weekend and found his mother’s corpse at home. That child was Fei Du. He was in middle school[16] then.”

Lang Qiao froze.

“Later, the investigation showed that his mother had killed herself. Wenzhou went to tell him in person, but he didn’t believe it… Since then they haven’t quite gotten along.” While he spoke, Tao Ran had already reached the sub-bureau’s gate. “You must have been able to tell that his family is fairly well-off. His father was a standard

businessman, away for work all the time. When his wife died, it was several days before he came back. Fei Du wasn't very sociable when he was little. He went through several housekeepers, and none of them stayed. He was usually alone in that big house where his mother died. That was the first proper case that had passed through our hands. It had a special significance. We couldn't let it go. I felt bad whenever I thought of that child having no one to mind him, so during the New Year and other holidays I would take him in for a few days. He had a fair amount of contact with us during that period. As time went on, we found out the child had a special talent."

"For what?" said Lang Qiao.

Tao Ran paused, then quietly said, "Crime."

Lang Qiao immediately noticed that the word he'd used had been "crime," and not "deduction" or "investigation" or something. But before she could question him further, Tao Ran had already brought the conversation to a halt. He waved at her and hurriedly walked away.

CHAPTER 7 - Julien VI

“Deputy…Deputy-Captain Tao!”

Tao Ran turned and saw the sub-bureau’s “waterspout” wonder, Little Glasses Xiao Haiyang, pelting towards him.

Xiao Haiyang’s glasses had been broken yesterday, and he hadn’t yet taken the time to switch to new ones; they hung crookedly down over his cheekbones. He stood breathlessly in front of Tao Ran, his expression uncommonly grave as he took several deep breaths. Tao Ran’s chest hurt a little just looking at him.

Xiao Haiyang’s face was as tense as if he’d just had a facelift. He wiped his sweaty palms on his pants and pushed up his glasses, which were on their last gasp. Then he could clear his throat and fish a notepad out of his pocket. “Deputy-Captain Tao, there’s something I want to report to you.”

Tao Ran good-naturedly waited for him to catch his breath. “Don’t rush. Anything you have to say, take your time.”

“It’s like this: yesterday while we were making inquiries in the West District, I discovered the living situation over there is very complex, highly fluid and seasonal. It’s normal for renters to move away when they change jobs. As for those overcrowded illegal rentals, they’re really more a sort of rundown long-term hostel. Because of this, relationships between people aren’t very close, except for people from the same place looking after each other. Yesterday my colleagues worked all day without getting much useful information.”

Tao Ran gave a faintly encouraging nod. “Right.”

“But among the people living with He Zhongyi, there was one from the same province as him, called…” Xiao Haiyang flipped through his memo book. “…called Zhao Yulong. He got on well with the victim. Apparently He Zhongyi got the delivery job on his introduction. Ma Xiaowei said he’s had to go back home to deal with something these past few days.”

Tao Ran raised his eyebrows in surprise. He had just been thinking of contacting this person.

“Yesterday evening I found the person in charge of supply for the coffee shop chain and got Zhao Yulong’s contact information,” said Xiao Haiyang. “When he heard the news, he agreed to take the last long-distance bus back to Yan City last night. I arranged to see him today.”

Tao Ran looked at him thoughtfully. “I thought the sub-bureau’s investigation was focused on Ma Xiaowei.”

Xiao Haiyang’s face tensed even further. He subconsciously tugged at the hem of his shirt. “I…I’ve been thinking that there’s something wrong with that mysterious individual who gave the victim the phone. Now they’ve identified Ma Xiaowei as the murderer, there are still many questionable points… I discussed this with our captain… He told me to not be such a smart ass and stop buying trouble.”

At this point, Tao Ran’s face grew serious, his warm smile vanishing. “What time did you arrange to meet?”

“Um,” said Xiao Haiyang, looking at his watch, “if the long-distance bus isn’t late, an hour from now.”

Tao Ran came to a prompt decision. “I’m going with you. Come on!”

While the lowly criminal policemen pounded the pavement with the sun beating down on them, Master Fei was reclining in a soft swivel chair in his office.

He had his forehead propped on one finger. On the desk next to him was a laptop whose screen showed the short and unremarkable account of He Zhongyi's life. Fei Du found a phone number in his address book and made a call.

"Hi, Chang-xiong[17], it's me." Fei Du listened to the person on the other end say something, then looked down and laughed. "Right, it's a little embarrassing. There's actually something I'd like to ask your help with."

Less than half an hour later, Fei Du successfully got what he'd wanted—the footage from all the surveillance cameras around Chengguang Mansion on the night it had opened for business.

During the midday rest, Fei Du warmed up a jar of sweet milk in the tearoom microwave, off-handedly complimented a secretary's figure and advised her to eat well and not diet anymore, then locked himself into his office. He put on his headphones, with the song from the car playing on repeat, then got out a sheet of A4 paper.

Using a series of abstract markings only he could understand, he sketched a simple topographical map. He fiddled with his pen, pondered a moment, then lightly drew some circles on it. He wrote "20:00-21:30"; then the tip of his pen paused, and he changed "20:00" to "20:30."

Fei Du selected a few surveillance files from among a big heap of them, opened them all together, chose the segment from eight-thirty to nine-thirty, and watched them on fast-forward.

On the screen, several images quickly played at the same time. He leaned indolently back in his chair, all the vigor in his body seeming to be gathered in his eyes as he motionlessly watched the screen.

Meanwhile, briefcase tucked under his arm, wearing his flashy sunglasses, Luo Wenzhou was strolling around a traffic hub in the Flower Market District. From time to time he would stretch out an arm towards the taxis passing in the road; unfortunately, none of the taxis racing by were free. Upon seeing this, the Flower Market District's special product—a string of unlicensed black cabs—all issued invitations to him.

"Need a ride, handsome?"

"Where are you headed?"

"It's cheap, and faster than a taxi!"

Luo Wenzhou critically inspected the ranks of black cabs and finally stopped in front of one young man with a crewcut.

The young man was very alert. At once, he solicitously opened the car door for him. "Please get in. Where are you headed?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't answer. He got in.

The crewcut young man turned on the air-conditioning for him and steadily drove out of the line of cars. "You still haven't said where you want to go, handsome?"

"Just keep driving on ahead, all right?" Luo Wenzhou took off his sunglasses. His keen gaze met the driver's in the rearview mirror, and the driver froze, feeling inexplicable unease.

“I have here an anonymous report.” When they had travelled some distance, Luo Wenzhou unhurriedly opened his briefcase, fished out a photocopied document and casually flipped through it. The driver’s expression altered at once; he nearly scraped against the car next to him, meeting with a long horn blast. Luo Wenzhou was unmoved. “I’m not with your sub-bureau. Don’t panic, just keep driving. I have some things to ask you.”

Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang successfully met with He Zhongyi’s fellow provincial Zhao Yulong. The three of them went to a little noodle shop together.

Zhao Yulong was into middle age. He had been scraping out a living in Yan City for many years. While his position was still insecure, he was a lot more respectable than the young men who knocked around everywhere without catching a break. The man’s face had the tired look of someone who had ridden ten hours and more on a long-distance bus. He blinked hard several times, the generous bags under his eyes trembling. “I never expected anything would happen to him.—Officers, is it all right if I smoke?”

No one in the little noodle shop was enforcing anti-smoking regulations; the place was full of men puffing away. Zhao Yulong took two big drags and rubbed his face. “Zhongyi was a well-behaved kid. A lot of people with nothing better to do go to the pool halls or gaming parlors, but he never did. He was steady, went to work and saved money; he said he wanted to send it home to pay for his mother’s medical treatment. He didn’t loot or steal or gamble. He certainly didn’t cause trouble. How could this happen to him of all people?—Ask me anything you want. As long as I know the answer, I won’t hold back.”

Tao Ran had been examining Zhao Yulong. He found that while he held his chopsticks with his right hand when he ate, he held his

cigarette with his left hand and kept his teacup on that side as well —this was a common occurrence; in the past parents would worry their child would "fight" when eating at the table and forcibly "correct" a lefty.

Tao Ran got a photograph out of his bag; it was of the shoes worn by the victim. "I'd like to ask you, if I might, whether you lent these shoes to He Zhongyi?"

Zhao Yulong took a look. The rims of his eyes nearly reddened. He nodded faintly. "They're mine, he…he passed wearing these shoes?"

"Yes. These shoes are crucial," said Tao Ran. "Would you know why he wanted to borrow them?"

Zhao Yulong looked a little lost. He thought, then said, "He said he was going to a pretty upscale place to meet someone, a place called…called something Guang…Chengguang House, or was it Villa?"

Xiao Haiyang abruptly sat upright. "Chengguang Mansion!"

"That's it," said Zhao Yulong, "that was the name."

"To meet whom? When?"

Zhao Yulong shook his head. "He didn't say. I asked, but that child had very upright ideas, and he could keep his mouth closed."

Xiao Haiyang quickly followed up, "Mr. Zhao, He Zhongyi had a new cell phone, didn't he?"

"Yes, he did," said Zhao Yulong, "the white one, right? He never could bring himself to use it. He always carried the old one he'd had before. He'd take the new phone out to look at it sometimes,

though he put a lot of protective film over it first."

"Do you know who gave him that phone?" asked Xiao Haiyang.

Zhao Yulong frowned slowly.

"What's wrong?" asked Tao Ran.

"At first he said someone from his hometown gave it to him. I thought it was very strange at the time, because I'd never heard him mention having any acquaintances in the city before. I was afraid he'd done something stupid, met some bad people. Isn't buying someone such an expensive thing out of nowhere showing pointed attention for no reason?" Zhao Yulong tapped out some cigarette ash. "I wouldn't leave him alone and kept on asking, and he finally said that one day while he was making deliveries, he had a conflict with someone. The other person hit him a few times, and he didn't fight back. Afterwards I guess the other guy regretted it or something and gave him the phone as a formal apology."

Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang exchanged a look—they hadn't heard about this when they'd gone to make inquiries.

Was there anything worth concealing about having a conflict with someone who later formally apologized to you?

If this was true, why had He Zhongyi been vague about the details and even pretended an acquaintance had given it to him?

He Zhongyi lived with so many people that if no one had noticed that he'd been beaten up, it clearly showed that the fight hadn't been serious; so why had the other party sent a valuable object along with the "formal apology?"

All of a sudden, this homicide case that had seemed like it could be

quickly solved by investigating the victim's personal relationships had inexplicably turned into something bewildering.

Zhao Yulong didn't know the precise origins of the mysterious phone, but he did supply the approximate time the conflict had taken place. Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang had to follow this clue to root around for traces at the delivery company He Zhongyi had worked at.

After noon, without any warning, the boundlessly clear sky changed its mood. The rampant sunlight was hemmed in on all sides and swallowed up by black clouds that came out of nowhere. There was humidity in the oppressive wind. It was clear that a rainstorm was about to break out.

Luo Wenzhou got out of the cab near a subway entrance but didn't go in. He put his hand on the car door and looked all around. A minibus parked at the intersection moved suddenly when his gaze swept over it; it slunk off as if it had a guilty conscience.

Luo Wenzhou bent slightly and spoke into the driver's ear through the half-open window. "Somebody's watching you. Be careful. Come to me if you need anything."

Despite the air-conditioning blowing cold air at him, the driver's forehead was covered in sweat. He nodded quickly.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him profoundly, then turned and went into the subway station. He had just come through the security check when his phone rang.

"Tao Ran, what is it?" he said, swiping his card and going through. Then he stopped in his tracks. "What? Say that name again."

The window in Fei Du's office, which hadn't been shut properly,

was blown closed by the wind with a slam. Some papers floated down to the floor, rustling. Just then, his hand, loosely holding the mouse, suddenly moved.

Fei Du froze one of the surveillance camera images, enlarged it, and played it again. He noted that the time was around 8:50 PM.

This was a very peripheral camera, hardly within the limits of Chengguang Mansion. It was focused on a gravel path. Though it was early summer, owing to the nearby water feature, the mosquitoes were already plentiful. After dark there were few passersby, and anyone who did go by was in a hurry—but there was one hesitant figure that paced under the streetlamp for a long time.

The camera showed that this person was wearing crudely made and uncoordinated formal attire. He was rather skinny and not tall. He stayed where he was, smoking several cigarettes in a row. He was tightly holding a kraft-paper envelope. From time to time he looked in a certain direction for a moment. After a while, he seemed to get a phone call. He said a few words to the person on the phone, then hurriedly walked out of the frame.

Fei Du replayed this segment of video several times. He couldn't be sure that this was the victim, whom he had only glimpsed once. He grabbed his car keys, closed his computer, and left.

Forty minutes later, Fei Du arrived in the Flower Market District's commercial center.

He looked up at the increasingly gloomy sky, dredged up an umbrella from the trunk of his car, then walked to the landscaped grounds around Chengguang Mansion.

Fei Du had an excellent sense of direction; he hardly got turned around finding the position of that security camera.

The water vapor in the air was so thick it was about to start pouring down. He carefully examined the camera's position, recalling the direction the person in the video had looked in. He turned—at the far end of the path, Chengguang Mansion could be vaguely seen.

Fei Du's gaze fell on a garbage can next to him—on the ash tray several lonely cigarette butts.

This place was off the beaten track. The garbage can was clean. Hardly anyone ever threw anything into it. A sanitation worker might come by only once every other week to clean it out. Fei Du took a silk handkerchief from his pocket and carefully picked up the cigarette butts.

His phone suddenly rang.

Fei Du unhurriedly wrapped up the cigarette butts, then took out his phone. Seeing the caller ID, he smiled before he spoke. "What, you suddenly feel that not seeing me for a day is like spending three years apart?"

Tao Ran's tone was serious. "The night before last, were you at the Chengguang Mansion?"

"Yes." Fei Du paused. "What is it?"

"Were you with a person called Zhang Donglai?"

Fei Du immediately froze. Before he could respond, a flattening thunderclap rang out; the heavy rain came pouring down.

CHAPTER 8 - Julien VII

Lang Qiao charged into the City Bureau building carrying a folding umbrella, leaving a string of sopping wet footprints.

She slipped on her way up the stairs and nearly fell on her face; desperately grabbing the railing, she looked up just in time to see Luo Wenzhou coming down from the floor Director Zhang's office was on.

Luo Wenzhou met her eyes, his face unusually grave.

Lang Qiao twisted her wet bangs off her forehead. "Chief, what *is* the matter? When you look so serious, I start getting nervous."

"Today, following a lead given to them by He Zhongyi's roommate, Tao Ran and the sub-bureau's Little Glasses deduced that He Zhongyi may have encountered a mysterious individual before his death," Luo Wenzhou said quietly. "For certain reasons, this individual apparently had a slight conflict with He Zhongyi while he was working. Afterwards, as a formal apology, this person gave him that cell phone."

Luo Wenzhou was tall and long-legged; he walked very quickly. Lang Qiao had to trot to keep up with him. Hearing his words, she felt her brains were about to evaporate along with the water in her hair. Somewhat hazily, she repeated, "A slight conflict? And…a phone for that? I have conflicts with people on the subway every day, how come no one's ever given *me* a phone?"

For once Luo Wenzhou didn't pick up her joke. "Tao Ran and Xiao Haiyang went back to the distribution center the victim worked at to investigate. They made inquiries along his delivery route and finally found an eye-witness in the shopfront of one of the chain

coffee shops. The witness said that some time back, when He Zhongyi had finished making his deliveries and was getting ready to leave, he really did get into a fight with someone not far from the shop's door. The shop's security camera happened to catch the person's license plate number."

As they spoke, the two of them had arrived outside an interrogation room. Through the one-way glass, they could see Tao Ran sitting across from a young man.

He was around twenty, with hair dyed the color of flax, dressed in luxury brand name clothes. He was clearly desperately trying to force down his anger; fury was nearly steaming out of the seven apertures of his face.

"Yes, I may have beat up this loser, so what? I've beat up a lot of people. But this really has nothing to do with me. If you don't believe me, ask Fei Du. Didn't we go together that night? Officer Tao, let me tell you, if it weren't for Master Fei's sake, you guys arresting me like this, I fucking…I'd already…"

Lang Qiao looked blankly at the aggressive young man in the interrogation room. "This is the second suspect? Why have you brought him to the City Bureau?"

"On the night he died, the victim had said he was going to a place called Chengguang Mansion. That person in there was at Chengguang Mansion that day." Luo Wenzhou sighed. "His name is Zhang Donglai. He's the son of a rather prestigious local businessman."

"Oh. A rich kid." Lang Qiao blinked. "So?"

"He's also Director Zhang's nephew," said Luo Wenzhou.

Lang Qiao stared.

Before she could restart her blue-screened brain, a civil policeman on duty ran over and quietly said to Luo Wenzhou, “Captain Luo, there’s a Mr. Fei here, says he wants to see Deputy Tao.”

Fei Du politely thanked the duty officer who had poured him a drink. He took it and drank a mouthful, then put it aside—the coffee they had poured him was instant, and it had a peculiar flavor of sesame oil.

He looked around at the décor inside the City Bureau; he felt that it was all in poor taste, and badly made to boot. There were flecks of paint on the corner of the table; it had probably just been painted. There was still a faint smell.

When Luo Wenzhou came in, he saw Fei Du earnestly scrutinizing the grain of their table. He was frowning, his expression deeply gloomy. If he hadn’t been able to see under the table, Luo Wenzhou would almost have thought there was a body hidden there.

Fei Du looked up at him. He didn’t seem at all surprised. He nodded simply and said, “Do sit down.”

Luo Wenzhou: “…”

The brat took this for his own house!

Fei Du stirred his sesame-flavored coffee with a plastic spoon. “Where’s Tao Ran?” he asked.

“He’s busy.” Luo Wenzhou pulled out a pen and spread out his notebook. Without any useless small talk, he got right to the point. “On the night of the twentieth, the day before yesterday, were you with Zhang Donglai? Think before you answer.”

Fei Du leaned back in his chair, slightly raised his head, and untidily crossed his long legs. While his posture couldn't be called unseemly, it still gave the impression that this place couldn't quite contain him.

He looked at Luo Wenzhou with a smile that wasn't quite a smile and asked in turn, "Captain Luo, am I a suspect?"

Luo Wenzhou looked at him coldly.

Fei Du spread his hands indifferently. "Then you had better be a little more polite to me. If I'm not a suspect, a summons for questioning isn't compulsory. I can leave whenever I want if I'm unhappy."

"Oh." Luo Wenzhou put down his pen. "I have to make you happy first? All right, why don't you tell me how I should do that? Should I sing you a song, or go out and buy you a bag of candy?"

Fei Du, who had been turned down with some milk candies by Officer Tao the night before, had nothing to say.

The storm outside beat against the window so hard it rattled. The two people in the room, each finding the other displeasing to the eye, sat across from each other in silence.

After a while, perhaps thinking he was being childish, Luo Wenzhou laughed derisively, got out a pack of cigarettes, tapped it lightly against the table, and was about to light up.

"I do mind," Fei Du said without having been asked. "I've had a touch of pharyngitis recently."

"If you lost your voice," Luo Wenzhou said with a false smile, "we

wouldn't be far from world peace."

But all the same he put down his lighter and twirled the unlit cigarette in his hand several times. "Zhang Donglai says that he met you at the door of Chengguang Mansion around eight the night before last. From then until midnight, when you left, you can vouch for his whereabouts."

"I arrived a little before eight and left at ten past midnight," Fei Du said coolly. "I did in fact speak to him at both of those times. The events arranged by the owner were rather 'abundant.' If I said he was in my line of sight the whole time, that would be illogical, and you wouldn't believe me, anyway."

Luo Wenzhou's hands were busily tearing at the cigarette paper. "Why? Weren't you two raising hell together the whole time?"

Fei Du rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward slightly. The smell of cologne mixed with rain wafted over like threads of silk. "Because I don't like sharing partners with other men.—Captain Luo, if you ask me such a boring and disingenuous question again, I'll have to say goodbye."

"I hadn't noticed you were so picky." Luo Wenzhou delivered this strictly business-like taunt without looking up, then said, "In other wards, you can't testify that Zhang Donglai didn't kill anyone at Chengguang Mansion that day."

"I can't, but there are people who can. I can have everyone who came in contact with him that night over here within two hours. A handbag per person should cover their travel expenses."

Luo Wenzhou's pen jabbed at the table. "Are you hinting that you're planning to use your wealth to falsify evidence?"

“What, a few fashion models perjure themselves, you’re worried the cream of the police force won’t be able to get the truth out of them?” Fei Du shook his head. “No, I’m telling you why Zhang Donglai can’t be the murderer.”

Fei Du leaned back in his chair again, widening the distance between him and Luo Wenzhou. Drawing his voice out in the indolent tone peculiar to him, he said, “If it was Zhang Donglai, doing it himself would clearly be unwise. It’s entirely in his power to have the victim kidnapped, then illegally detained or killed in secret. Either way, the population of the West District is transient; dozens of people leave without saying goodbye every day. If one person goes missing, no one will notice. Even if someone reported it to the police, there would still be no one to take heed.”

Hearing this speech that entirely discounted the law and the state, Luo Wenzhou’s hands itched uncontrollably; he wanted to give this scum Fei a good beating. With a great effort, he resisted. The tip of his pen ripped through the paper, leaving an angry hole. “Killers often aren’t ‘wise’ when they kill.”

“Oh, you’re talking about a crime of passion.” Fei Du paused. “Aside from the injury that knocked the victim unconscious, was there any other blunt force trauma?”

“Are you questioning me, or am I questioning you?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“Sounds like the answer is ‘no,’” said Fei Du in a rather calm voice. “In a crime of passion murder, the murderer’s emotions erupt, his rage instantly reaching its zenith; it will usually vent itself like an eruption as well. With a victim unconscious on the ground with no power to resist, you would expect to see his head crushed like a watermelon.—He was strangled?”

He leaned his elbows on the chair's armrests, his fingertips propping up his chin. He smiled. "Strangling is a lengthy and enjoyable means of killing; sometimes it even has 'that kind' of flavor to it. Would a person dying of thirst be willing to sit down and 'sip tea?' Personally, I think that sequence doesn't seem very natural."

Luo Wenzhou's expression was severe. "You think killing someone is 'sipping tea?'"

"It's only a metaphor." Fei Du shrugged, focusing on the minor issue while avoiding the larger one. "Zhang Donglai wouldn't kill someone. Even if he killed someone, he wouldn't dump the body. Even if he dumped the body, he still wouldn't dump it in an alley in the West District, where he doesn't know his way around. That's my analysis from the rational point of view. From the intuitive angle—Zhang Donglai is a hopeless coward. When he gets angry, at most he'll curse someone out in public. He doesn't have the guts to kill."

From the time Fei had sat down, these last sentences were the only ones he'd spoken that sounded something like human speech.

Zhang Donglai was Director Zhang's older brother's son. He was a late in life child, and his family was well-off; he was spoiled rotten, delicate and useless. Luo Wenzhou had seen him a few times; he really didn't think he had either the courage or the psychological quality.

The rest would have to rely on the police force's investigation. He wouldn't get anything out of Fei Du. Luo Wenzhou closed his notebook and stood up to leave.

"Hey." Behind him, Fei Du suddenly called him to a stop.

Luo Wenzhou looked back; a small object came hurtling towards him. He automatically reached out and grabbed it, then found that

Fei Du had tossed him a USB drive.

Fei Du said, “In a criminal case, there are several circumstances that can easily attract public notice. First, the scale is large; for example, a terrorist attack; that’s news. Second, the method is especially abnormal and brutal; for example, something like a serial killer that turns into colorful urban legend; that’s a novelty. Third, the victim belongs to a low-risk group; for example, students and wage-earners who live well-regulated lives, the law-abiding middle class; that excites group panic out of identification with the victim. Fourth, something that strikes at the heart of a deep-seated and long-standing social conflict; for example, matters touching public rights, privilege, the moral deficiencies of the social elite; that’s a topic.—Your case here doesn’t touch on any of these, but from the start it has received an unusual degree of notice.”

The dull thunder, just about to lay down its arms, crackled indistinctly somewhere very remote, giving his words a lengthy reverberation.

“Once the temporary unusual notice had passed, according to reason, people would soon have lost interest. But now Zhang Donglai has been implicated, too.” Fei Du stood and went up to Luo Wenzhou; brushing past him, he softly said, “Is that a coincidence, or is someone playing you?”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression hardened.

“No need to thank me. I’m doing it for Tao Ran.” Fei Du picked up his umbrella and left without another look at him.

“Fei Du,” Luo Wenzhou suddenly said, “it’s next week, right? Seven whole years. You ought to start afresh.”

Fei Du ignored him. Maintaining his even steps, he walked away

without a look back.

CHAPTER 9 - Julien VIII

Wang Hongliang was in the prime of life, but half a lifetime of dissipation had left him somewhat aged before his time. The flesh of his cheeks sagged with a will of its own down to the level of his chin. At a glance, he looked like a Shar Pei plotting the overthrow of all mankind.

He inclined forward, examining the detained Ma Xiaowei while puffing away at a cigarette, blowing out a local Southern Gates of Heaven[18].

Ma Xiaowei was too thin, so thin it nearly gave his face a look of pathetic childish awkwardness. Although he had a cell to himself, his whole body was still pulled taut, his eyeballs nearly starting from their sockets as they rolled every which way without being able to stop long on any one point.

Wang Hongliang tilted his head and fixed a look on him, saying to the person next to him, “So they’ve slunk off and taken him to the City Bureau?”

The person standing next to him was the head of the sub-bureau’s Criminal Investigation Team. This person hardly made his presence known while cases were being investigated. For his orders he relied on the general trend, and for his judgments he relied on his leader, like a mouthpiece transmitting down from above. He held up an ashtray and approached to receive Wang Hongliang’s cigarette end. “That’s what Xiao Haiyang reported.”

“I didn’t expect this. I really never expected it, it hardly seems real —how could there be such a coincidence in the world?” Wang Hongliang laughed aloud, showing teeth but no eyes, becoming a Shar Pei receiving the songs and praises of emancipated serfs. “No

wonder my fortune said that although I would encounter obstacles this year, an eminent person can sometimes turn a misfortune into a blessing. That three-thousand yuan Serenity Talisman did some good. It turns out that aside from never making and always marring, that Xiao Haiyang may actually have some use."

"Director Wang, what do you think we should do now?" the person next to him asked deferentially.

"Luo Wenzhou has stretched out his hand too quickly." Wang Hongliang combed through the sparse hairs on top of his head. "Just because the City Bureau chief's relative is a major suspect, they've gotten out from underfoot."

As he spoke, he paced a few circles, then waved his hand. "Never mind. Leave it to them. If even Luo Wenzhou isn't afraid others will say they're abusing power for personal benefit, what do I have to be afraid of? Now that a second suspect has turned up, it clearly shows this case is much more complicated than we imagined. It's a case of a body being dumped after the killing.—It's all the fault of the surrounding masses confusing the course of the investigation with their misleading testimony. The noises they heard had no connection to this case. Let them go investigate where they like, Chengguang Mansion or anywhere else, as long as it isn't in the *West District*. We'll do all we can to support the City Bureau's work."

"Director Wang is bold but cautious," said the head of the sub-bureau's Criminal Investigation Team, bootlicking with a smile. Then he said, "Another time you must tell me about the place you got this talisman from. It's really very effective."

"Well said. Give them my name when you go, they can give you a good discount." Wang Hongliang patted his subordinate's shoulder. "You know, when you reach this age, you start to find that not believing in things doesn't work out. To get wealth and promotion,

you have to rely on fate.—Right, didn't I hear the victim's relative is coming soon? Send them to the City Bureau, too."

He headed outside, then suddenly thought of something, looked back at Ma Xiaowei, and meaningfully said, "Look at that child. At first glance he doesn't look like much, but when you look closely, his features are really lucky, something of the full, prominent forehead, round jaw and chin[19] look."

The person next to him had no idea what he was talking about.

"Therefore," said Wang Hongliang with a laugh, "he's very blessed!"

While the whole Flower Market District was deliberating divinity, there was a deep depression hanging over Yan City's City Bureau.

Tao Ran left the interrogation room and released a long breath while leaning wearily against the wall. Apparently Zhang Donglai had had a fever as a child that had cooked his brain and made him grow up into an out-and-out stupid cunt; he had to be forgiven eight times a minute in order to keep up a conversation.—And this was the even-tempered Tao Ran; another person would have been flipping tables long ago.

Luo Wenzhou was waiting for him at the door, holding a USB drive in his hand. He was just subconsciously twisting it in his fingers. Xiao Haiyang, who had been listening in on the interrogation, seemed a little scared of him—he was maintaining a fixed distance between them.

Luo Wenzhou looked up. "How was it?"

"Zhang Donglai says he may have gotten a little drunk that day. He saw an unemployed youth bothering his little sister, thought he was a delinquent, got excited, and hit him. Afterwards he didn't

remember just who it was he'd hit. I showed him a photograph of the victim, and he just said he looked a little familiar, he couldn't be sure. And according to him, he didn't formally apologize to anyone or give anyone a phone—that last part I think is true. The brat still hasn't worked out that there's anything wrong with beating people up." Tao Ran pinched the bridge of his nose. "Right, did Fei Du come by just now?"

"He's already left," Luo Wenzhou confirmed, then remembered something and, glaring at Tao Ran, added, "That little bastard, he's getting more and more disgraceful. It's all your fault for spoiling him."

Tao Ran: "…"

He thought that this complaint sounded very strange.

Luo Wenzhou tossed him the USB drive he was holding. "Go look into this, there may be something useful on it."

Tao Ran took it in bewilderment. "What's this?"

"I don't know, but I figure it's the surveillance footage from Chengguang Mansion." Luo Wenzhou looked at the irascible Zhang Donglai through the surveillance camera. "I've met his sister. She's a pretty normal girl. Call her to confirm that what Zhang Donglai said is reliable. I'm going to have a word with Director Zhang."

But when Luo Wenzhou went to the Director-General's office for the second time, he didn't see the Director-General himself.

A stocky man looked up and nodded genially at Luo Wenzhou. "You're here?"

This man was about the same age as Director Zhang. There was an

old scar over his right brow, from his forehead to just over his eyelid, but he didn't look fierce at all. Everything about him seemed very kindly.

Luo Wenzhou was a little taken aback. "Director Lu?"

Director Lu's name was Lu Youliang[20]. He was Director Zhang's second-in-command. He had been a criminal policeman for many years, solved many major cases and caught countless diabolical criminals in all the eras when technology was still underdeveloped. He was one of the legends of Yan City's City Bureau; however improper a person was, he would have to restrain himself a little in front of Director Lu.

"Right. For now, say anything you have to say to me. Lao Zhang has stepped back to avoid suspicion.—You people, you really shouldn't have brought this person here. When you suspect someone, you have to arrest and investigate him on the spot. What do you mean by bringing him here? Are you planning to use your authority to shield him, or putting up a sign that says 'three hundred silver coins are not buried here?[21]'" Director Lu sighed, then pointed at Luo Wenzhou. "Wenzhou, you're all right, but you're a little too nervy. So young, and already much too shrewd."

Luo Wenzhou's expression didn't flicker. He looked out and scanned the empty corridor, then cautiously closed the door. "Uncle Lu."

Director Lu froze.

"There's a criminal policeman from the sub-bureau downstairs. His name is Xiao Haiyang." Luo Wenzhou kept his voice very low. "When he gave us a report on the circumstances of the case at the very outset, he said, 'We can't discount the possibility that this isn't the first crime scene.' I thought then that sounded a little unnatural, because whether it is or isn't the initial crime scene is something we

determine according to the evidence and the medical examiner's findings. Before the evidence has been collected, absent a clear indication, very few people will discuss whether it's the initial crime scene or if the body was moved. Wang Hongliang reacted, too, berating him right in front of my face. I didn't think too much of it; I just thought Xiao Haiyang's way of thinking may be different from other people's."

"I don't quite understand what you mean," said Director Lu heavily.

"Director Zhang sent me to investigate Wang Hongliang," said Luo Wenzhou. "I just received a report from an informer. I now suspect Wang Hongliang is colluding with the Flower Market District's drug trafficking gangs."

Director Lu frowned. "The Flower Market District is very advanced in fighting drugs."

"That's right. Don't you think it's funny how they can have so many accurate informers, each leading to an arrest?" Luo Wenzhou spoke rapidly. "The person who made the report said that they have a network of 'specially licensed' drug dealers. If anyone who isn't part of this organization sets foot within the limits of the Flower Market District's jurisdiction, they'll be ferreted out immediately."

"Where's the evidence?" said Director Lu.

"I'm gathering it now," said Luo Wenzhou. "Getting back to the homicide case, yesterday we accidentally received evidence from the masses living around the crime scene, saying that they heard an argument around 9 PM. Then Wang Hongliang quickly arrested a teenager we suspect was present at the scene at that time. The kid is very skinny, his gaze wanders, he rambles, he gets terrified in an instant. His testimony is full of holes, but no matter how we questioned him, he maintained that he hadn't seen anyone near the

crime scene.—Now we really have found evidence leading us to suspect the victim's body may have been moved after he was killed. —So the question arises, if the argument the local citizens heard wasn't connected with this case, then why did the teenage suspect not dare to tell the truth from the beginning? Why did the criminal policeman Xiao Haiyang hint to me from the start that that wasn't the initial crime scene? Could he have known from the start that no murder had taken place there?"

Director Lu couldn't help getting up and pacing a few circles.

"Uncle Lu," said Luo Wenzhou, "the threads here are numerous and complicated. There's a lot of ambiguity. I suspect these two cases are connected. It was quite a coincidence that Tao Ran and this Xiao Haiyang found Zhang Donglai. If I hadn't brought him back here at once, it's very likely Wang Hongliang would have seized on this and blown it out of proportion, forcing Director Zhang and us to cease our involvement. There's no saying but that the kid they arrested would have turned up at the sub-bureau dead from a 'drug overdose' tomorrow morning, all his testimony put down to the ravings of a drug addict, the murderer determined to be an arrogant rich kid."

"What are you planning to do?" asked Director Lu.

"For the moment, treat Zhang Donglai as the chief suspect," said Luo Wenzhou. "As long as we appear to turn our attention away from the Flower Market District, separating these two connected cases, Wang Hongliang will probably push his boat along with the current and leave the homicide to us."

The Main Criminal Investigation Team worked overtime investigating the surveillance footage Fei Du had provided. It was late at night when Luo Wenzhou got home. As soon as he opened the door, he heard a "meow," and a house cat stuck its head out.

Luo Wenzhou gently pushed it back inside with his foot. “What’re you meowing at, I haven’t eaten yet, either…huh?”

He found a new package in the mailbox at his door and picked it up to take a look. “Addressee: Luo Wenzhou” was written on it in a certain familiar regular script.

Luo Wenzhou opened the package. Inside was a sealed evidence bag containing several cigarette butts.

CHAPTER 10 - Julien IX

Luo Wenzhou upended the package; there was nothing else in it. But just then, his phone vibrated as a photograph arrived. It was of an out-of-the-way gravel path, decorated with neatly laid-out vegetation and a water feature, secluded and narrow, with a solitary garbage can sticking out in the middle. Underneath was a message without beginning or end: *in passing*.

Luo Wenzhou stared thoughtfully at the photograph for a while, but next to him, Master Cat wasn't having any of this.

Master Cat's full name was "Luo Yiguo." It was a seven-year-old middle-aged cat, round-faced, large-eyed, and sleek—it was just a little bad-tempered.

Luo Yiguo batted at Luo Wenzhou's leg with its paw; twisting its butt, it went over to the corner and crouched down, full of accusation, displaying an empty food bowl to its litter box attendant.

Unexpectedly, the stupid tall one only gave it a glance and remained wholly unmoved.

Suffering this rebuff, Luo Yiguo was enraged. It charged truculently and stood up on its hind legs hugging Luo Wenzhou's calf, yowling as it tore at his pant leg.

Luo Wenzhou bent and picked Luo Yiguo up by the scruff of its neck, holding it aloft. "Have you had your fill of living?"

Paws dangling, Luo Yiguo rumbled out a purr, then complacently stuck its tongue out at him.

Luo Wenzhou rolled his eyes and loosened his grip. The kitty deftly freed itself, gave an elegant roll in midair, and landed on all fours. Its wish was quickly fulfilled: it received adequate dry food, as well as a supplemental can of cat food.

Luo Yiguo was deeply satisfied; it found that the principle that “a stick makes a filial son” hadn’t led it astray; indeed, the litter box attendant wouldn’t behave unless he was bitten.

Luo Wenzhou crouched haphazardly and petted the cat for a while. Suddenly remembering something, he looked down at Luo Yiguo’s stuck-up large furry tail—Tao Ran had found this ancestor while strolling through the morning market and bought it to give to Fei Du. At first Fei Du had seemed to like it, but a few days after carrying it off he’d somehow gotten annoyed and absolutely refused to keep it.

Tao Ran had come from out of town. When he’d just started working, he couldn’t afford to buy a home and rented all over; there was no saying when he would have to move, so it really wasn’t convenient for him to keep a pet. He’d had to put the cat up with Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou hated cats, hated dogs, hated children sixteen years old and under. He’d been mad enough to lose his mind. He had issued a solemn ultimatum to Tao Ran, swearing that if he hadn’t found another home for the cat within a month, he’d stew the four-legged nuisance in a pot[22].

The upshot was that seven years had passed in a flash, another home hadn’t been found, and Luo Wenzhou had gone from a foul-mouthed carnivore to a hard-working and ungrudging litter box attendant, while Luo Yiguo had gone from reserve provisions to the master of the house.

This shows that worldly affairs really are hard to predict.

Luo Wenzhou pondered a while as he pet the cat, then suddenly stood up, took some leftover bread from the fridge, and walked out.

The streets were relatively uncrowded as Captain Luo, who liked nothing better than to arrive at work and leave exactly on schedule, returned to the City Bureau. When he walked into the office, aside from the officer on duty, he found one other person, who was still rubbing his eyes as he replayed the surveillance footage.

Luo Wenzhou's steps paused. He sighed. "I knew you wouldn't have left yet."

Tao Ran stretched. "I have nothing to do at home, anyway.—What are you doing back here?"

"I felt sorry for you following this solitary path working overtime in the middle of the night, so I came to offer help to the needy." Luo Wenzhou swaggered over next to him and sat down on his desk. "Model Worker, have you discovered anything?"

"Chengguang Mansion's security cameras are all external. Our technical staff has investigated all the footage from 8 PM to 10 PM on the night of the twentieth. The external cameras caught Zhang Donglai's face clearly four times in all; going by facial recognition, there are forty minutes during which he was neither on camera nor inside the club. But those 'forty minutes' are the product of addition. Each time he left, it was for a comparatively short time. He only went out of his way to avoid the cameras twice: once was around ten, when he left with a girl for about fifteen minutes; he deliberately looked up at where the camera was positioned. The second time was shortly before 12 AM. After midnight, the cameras in the club's courtyard are all turned off, so I don't know what time he returned."

Luo Wenzhou rubbed his chin. “Fifteen minutes?”

Tao Ran nodded very earnestly. “Right. If we find the girl, she should be able to act as a witness.”

Luo Wenzhou shook his head. “That’s really fast.”

Tao Ran: “…”

Before he could react, Luo Wenzhou’s tone changed. Like an upright gentleman, he asked, “Is He Zhongyi on camera?”

“No. This afternoon they picked out twenty-some cameras that may have caught He Zhongyi, but none of them have his face on them. There are some that are further out; I’ve been replaying them to have a look. I think there’s no one who looks like him. Do you really think that if the murderer had killed He Zhongyi at Chengguang Mansion, he would have inadvertently gotten caught on camera?”

“If the cameras at the entrances and exits didn’t catch him, it’s also possible that He Zhongyi himself was avoiding the security cameras.” Luo Wenzhou stood and paced behind Tao Ran’s back. “But if there really wasn’t anything there, Fei Du wouldn’t have given it to us.”

“With over four hours and so many cameras, how could he have seen anything? He probably gave it to us as reference.”

Luo Wenzhou shook his head. After a while, he suddenly remembered something. “What did you just say? They turn off the cameras in the courtyard after midnight?”

“That’s right. Only the ones in the parking lot and some

surrounding paths stay on."

"The cameras are probably turned off so they don't catch a throng of drunkards making fools of themselves. The ones left on are to ensure security." Luo Wenzhou gripped the back of Tao Ran's chair. "The security cameras in the courtyard must be placed where they can be seen by the guests, so they can easily avoid them if they want to. But outside the club, to make sure that no unidentified individuals make their way in, some of the cameras will be hidden… Pull up the footage from the ones that stay on all night."

Before he'd finished speaking, Tao Ran had already pulled them up.

Luo Wenzhou got out his phone and looked at the photograph he'd received. "Is there a security camera installed on a gravel path next to a water feature?"

"There is, actually," Tao Ran said a little doubtfully.

The timestamp on the security camera footage was 8 PM exactly. The whole screen was unmoving pitch black. As they played it through on fast-forward, the dark shadow blocking the screen hopped away and freed up the camera lens—it had been a bird.

The four corners of the recording were dark, with an image in the middle; it was obstructed from time to time by birds coming and going. Possibly the camera was concealed in a tree. Shortly before 8:50, a swaying human figure appeared near the garbage can under the security camera. Tao Ran quickly paused the image.

This person must have come to smoke beside the garbage can; he hadn't noticed the security camera in the tree.

"Wait, this person… I think he looks about right!" Tao Ran carefully scrutinized the image for a moment, then sighed. "If the cigarette

ends were still there, we should be able to tell with a DNA comparison. But there was that rainstorm this afternoon… By now it'll be—what are you smiling about?"

Luo Wenzhou pulled an evidence bag containing some cigarette ends from his pocket. "Go ahead and compare."

Tao Ran was astonished. "How did you… Where did you…"

"Shh—quietly." Luo Wenzhou put a finger to his lips and said almost inaudibly, "A very obnoxious young person sent it to me."

Tao Ran seemed even more astonished. "Have you two called a cease fire?"

Luo Wenzhou put a hand on the back of his head and returned it to its previous orientation. "Are there any other leads nearby?"

"Um, wait a second." Saying this, Tao Ran rolled out a marked-up map. "This path only goes to two places, Chengguang Mansion at one end and a public area at the other. This person clearly didn't go towards Chengguang Mansion when he left, he went the other way… As soon as you get out onto the road, there's a bus stop."

"I like public areas," said Luo Wenzhou with a smile. "You can investigate around them without needing to play nice with these rich people."

The two of them quickly left the City Bureau, headed straight for the Traffic Police Team near the bus stop.

The night was thick, the dew about to descend. Luo Wenzhou turned off the car's air-conditioning and opened the window to air out the car.

“Any lead we find tonight,” said Luo Wenzhou, “don’t tell anyone else yet, including our colleagues on the team.”

Tao Ran froze. “What?”

“Nothing. I figure that in a few days, the sub-bureau will formally request that the case be transferred to us,” said Luo Wenzhou. “At that time, you’ll concentrate on He Zhongyi’s case; leave the rest alone. Before we’ve tracked down the real killer, let Zhang Donglai stay ‘under suspicion’ for a few days. Maybe he’ll even develop some memory.”

Tao Ran heard an unusual trace of solemnity in these words and couldn’t resist tilting his head and looking at him.

The corners of Luo Wenzhou’s eyes turned up. “We’re both single men. If you look at me like that again, I’ll act like a brute.”

“Flirting with me is free, right?” Tao Ran very magnanimously waved his hand. “That’s right, I haven’t seen you go out with anyone in a long time. What happened to that guy who came to play pool with us last time?”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Oh, he went to study abroad. He’s studying Chinese in Italy.”

Tao Ran nearly choked on his own saliva. “That unreliable? How come?”

Luo Wenzhou shrugged expressionlessly. He had one hand on the steering wheel and the other on the half-opened window. “What do you want him to be reliable for? Anyway, my dad hasn’t retired yet. Though he’s never said anything to me, it doesn’t make a very good impression, after all. When he retires in a year or two, maybe I’ll think about finding a proper one. Being on my own is pretty good,

too.—The old man truly is addicted to work. I really can't comprehend it. I've wanted to retire for ages."

Tao Ran sighed. "You should be content with your lot. Your family's very open-minded."

Luo Wenzhou heard the meaning behind these words and immediately asked, "Your family's pressuring you to get married?"

"Like you wouldn't believe," said Tao Ran.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him. "I have niche interests. What's your problem?"

Tao Ran thought, then issued a short but forceful answer: "I'm poor."

Luo Wenzhou couldn't help it; he laughed out loud.

"What are you laughing at? My pitiful salary is just enough to pay back a housing loan. 'Poor' is an objective fact." Tao Ran pulled his rumpled hair carelessly. "Although I've managed to scrape together a down payment, so at any rate I qualify to go on a blind date. I think that's about enough for this lifetime. I don't think it's absolutely necessary to marry a goddess."

Luo Wenzhou shone the car's headlights on a street sign and found they weren't far from their destination. His gaze rested calmly on the road ahead. "Is there a goddess?"

"In senior middle school, there was a classmate in the class next-door who looked like Angie Chiu[23]," said Tao Ran. "We haven't been in touch for years. Maybe she's already married, and if she isn't married, that still doesn't mean I have a chance.—We're nearly there, wait while I call and have a word with the guys on duty."

Five minutes later, Luo Wenzhou parked the car. Tao Ran was about to get out when Luo Wenzhou, suddenly turning to him, said, “I want to ask you something rather serious.”

Tao Ran was bewildered. “What?”

“Supposing—I say just *supposing* you were a woman,” said Luo Wenzhou, “would you want to marry me or Fei Du?”

Tao Ran: “…”

“Supposing.”

Tao Ran considered it for a long time and then issued a conclusion: “If I were a woman, I doubt I’d have any attention to spare for the two of you. I’d be spending all day worrying about how to come out to my mom.”

“No coming out. All the women have died off.”

“Then the other…”

“All the other men have died off, too.” Saying this, Luo Wenzhou didn’t manage to keep a straight face. Laughing, he said, “It’s just the two of us.”

With over six billion people annihilated by Luo Wenzhou’s brief words, the corners of Tao Ran’s mouth twitched. At last he unfeelingly said, “Then I guess it has to be you.”

Despite all he could do to hold it back, Luo Wenzhou didn’t manage to restrain the wily smile of someone who had just pilfered a chicken. “You’d choose me? You’re sure?”

Tao Ran counted on his fingers. “I can only choose you. I think Fei Du won’t be of legal age to marry for another two months[24]… What are you doing?”

Luo Wenzhou was leaning back in his seat and laughing as if he’d just scored a signal victory.

Tao Ran entirely failed to understand what he had to be pleased about. He thought back a bit, then he was struck by something that made him break out in gooseflesh. Shaking his head, he got out of the car.

…He didn’t see that Luo Wenzhou was so despicable that he recorded this conversation.

As long as it wasn’t on private property like Chengguang Mansion, investigating security camera footage was pretty easy for the City Bureau’s personnel.

The camera at the bus stop hadn’t caught what time the person they suspected of being He Zhongyi had arrived in the neighborhood of Chengguang Mansion, but it did give them an enormous pleasant surprise—around 9 PM, it caught that person coming out of the path, then going directly towards the bus stop, waiting a few minutes, then getting on the Number 34 bus.

During this time he looked up to examine the route information, which was sufficient for Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran to determine that he was in fact He Zhongyi.

Meanwhile, a psychological counseling clinic had reached the end of its business hours. The last client stood, graciously said goodbye to the counselor, and got out a beautifully packaged box of chocolates. “You’ve worked hard, Dr. Bai. I thought you would like this flavor, so I brought some for you to taste.”

The counselor was already accustomed to this. This client named Fei Du was very good at appealing to people. He handed out sweet talk free of charge, never came late, never lost control of his emotions, and usually brought along an exquisite but not overly expensive little gift; even all the cleaners at the clinic knew him. She hadn't thanked him yet when his phone vibrated twice.

The counselor swallowed her words and smiled to indicate that he should go ahead and see to it.

Fei Du made a gesture of thanks and found that there were two messages on his phone.

The first message was very brief: "Many thanks."

The second had an audio recording attached and a message that read: "Courtesy demands reciprocity."

Fei Du put the phone speaker next to his ear.

"Supposing you were a woman, would you want to marry me or Fei Du? … All the other men have died off, too. It's just the two of us."

"Then I guess it has to be you."

"You'd choose me? You're sure?"

"I think Fei Du won't be of legal age to marry for another two months…"

Fei Du: "…"

CHAPTER 11 - Julien X

The counselor carefully scrutinized Fei Du. For a moment she had seen a complicated expression of unspeakable irritation flash across the young man's face, which made him seem more than ordinarily young and lively. She was almost a little astonished by this.

Fei Du had been referred to Dr. Bai some years ago. His previous counselor had been her shidi[25], an expert in young people's problems. Before that he had gone through an unknown number of counselors; probably Fei Du himself didn't clearly remember how many. It sounded as though he was simply a difficult person.

When referring the patient to her, her shidi had naturally contacted her in advance. Dr. Bai had wanted to know what problem had brought this child to seek psychological counseling and also why his current counseling couldn't continue.

"In fact, I don't know what his problem is," her shidi had said. "He's pretty cooperative. If you ask him to say something, he'll talk about it. I've tried to discuss the problem of the lack of affection during his childhood, and his mother's unfortunate death, and so on. He doesn't evade anything, his manner is very sincere. When you don't have anything to say next he'll sometimes even very considerately hand you the next topic. Bai-jie, you understand, right?"

Dr. Bai had quickly heard his implication—the patient was uncooperative.

Dr. Bai had been working for many years. She had seen each and every type of uncooperative client: there were the ones who fabricated things during the evaluation; there were the ones whose relatives were forcing them, who persisted in thinking they didn't have a problem; there were also those who thought themselves very

clever and tried to reverse analyze the counselor, and the process became a battle of wits.

A psychological counselor wasn't all-powerful. There would always be some people who, for various reasons, would never be able to build a relationship of mutual trust with the counselor, and the counseling would fail in the end. These patients were either referred to others or slowly gave up on psychological counseling and didn't come again.

Fei Du was, without a doubt, a special case among special cases.

He belonged to the type that fabricated at the initial evaluation, and moreover his fabrication was totally unassailable. He was also an engaging conversationalist during the sessions. He evaded very little. At first glance he even gave the impression of having nothing to hide. When he had been a little younger, he had already been very adept at self-control; if the conversation touched on a sensitive subject, he would display neither aggression nor defensiveness towards the counselor; his emotional feedback was direct from start to finish.

The only problem was that it was too direct.

Encountering keenly felt pain, the healthiest and most powerful person still couldn't maintain an inward intellectual calm from start to finish—after all, a mighty AI only needs to have its batteries charged; it doesn't need psychological counseling.

Dr. Bai used countless methods without being able to establish an effective doctor-patient channel of communication. She could only lay down her cards and acknowledge to him: "My level of expertise ends here. I may not be able to help you. If you believe you still need help, I can try referring you to a better counselor."

She hadn't expected Fei Du to refuse. Further, after going through over a month of treatment with no outcome, like someone with more money than brains, he had doubled the counseling fee, buying out the last two hours of Dr. Bai's schedule every Wednesday evening. And every time he came, he would very sweetly compliment, "I feel very comfortable here with you. It's really helping me."—If Dr. Bai didn't think she was old enough to be his mother, it was possible she would have gotten the wrong impression and suspected this little playboy was coming to try to pick her up.

There weren't so many things worth talking about in his ordinary life, so Fei Du would borrow a book from her, then come to return it the week after. He would discuss the borrowed book with Dr. Bai, just as if he wasn't coming for psychological counseling but instead was doing graduate studies with her. Very slowly, she found that although the effects were slight, this method could sometimes make him reveal a bit of his true ideas; though as soon as she tried to follow up, he would once again very cunningly avoid her.

He was like a person living sealed in a castle, surrounded on all sides by an iron fastness with only one clear window, from behind which he quietly observed the people outside. Only by remaining very composed could you make him cautiously open the window a crack.

Dr. Bai cautiously examined Fei Du, then asked him, "A friend?"

"A practical joker who bites the hand that feeds him." Fei Du ground his teeth lightly and put his phone back in his pocket. "I'll be going now. I'll come bother you again next week."

According to habit, Dr. Bai saw him to the door.

With one hand on the door, Fei Du signaled behind him with the

other that there was no need to see him out. Then he suddenly remembered something and said, “Right, Dr. Bai, I suppose next week will be my last time coming. I thought I should tell you ahead of time so you could arrange to give the time to someone else.”

Dr. Bai froze and automatically asked, “You feel that your problem has been resolved? You won’t need to come again after this?”

Fei Du nodded. “Yeah, lately I’ve felt like I’ve slowly been moving on from where I started and sampling new modes of life. I’m very grateful for your help all these years.”

Dr. Bai smiled bitterly. “But I still don’t know where you started.”

“It’s enough that I know.” Fei Du smiled at her. “We’ll chat again next week.”

The next morning, Yan City’s much-bemoaned great traffic restriction continued.

As for one person, once again riding a jangling broken-down bicycle, looking like he was delivering take-out, some cat hairs still stuck to his pant leg, in this condition having an unavoidable encounter with his luxury-sedan-driving rival in love—

Who knows how another person person would have reacted? Captain Luo, anyway, was habitually shameless; his psychological quality was sufficiently firm. His pedaling gave the bicycle the imposing bearing of an aircraft carrier; using the “foot brake,” he stopped the bike by the side of the road and raised his chin at Fei Du. “Come to give charity to the comrades at the Traffic Police Team again, you local tyrant? In a while I’ll have them give you a wholesale VIP parking ticket.”

Fei Du unhurriedly opened his mouth to return fire. “I still get hit

with a ticket when accompanying a friend's sister to cooperate with a police investigation? Captain Luo, your bureau truly won't attend to legitimate business if there's no way to make a profit off of it."

Then he looked the doors of the City Bureau up and down, the words "Tsk, how poor" clearly hanging on the corners of his eyes and the tips of his brows.

Luo Wenzhou looked behind him and saw a young man and woman get out of the car. The girl's eyes were red. Looking closely, there was some resemblance to Zhang Donglai.

Luo Wenzhou got off his "bike-shaped carrier." "Zhang Ting?"

Zhang Donglai had a little sister named Zhang Ting. Luo Wenzhou wasn't well acquainted with her—after all, she was a well-behaved young lady who didn't get tossed in little dark rooms in police stations for speeding like her useless big brother.

Zhang Ting was about to answer when the man next to her stopped her.

The man walked up, gave Luo Wenzhou a business card, and rushed to open his mouth before Zhang Ting could. "Hello, officer. I'm a lawyer. I have accepted the position of assisting the party Zhang Donglai. I'd like to understand something of the circumstances of the investigation from you."

Luo Wenzhou frowned, his gaze scraping over the lawyer's face. When he was neither speaking nor smiling, his countenance had a sort of haughty coldness.

Luo Wenzhou didn't move to accept the business card. He looked at Fei Du; Fei Du was leaning against the car playing on his phone as if the matter was no concern of his. Luo Wenzhou spoke past the

lawyer to Zhang Ting. “Did you talk to your family about hiring a lawyer? Does your uncle know?”

Zhang Ting stared.

Without waiting for her to answer, Luo Wenzhou took the lawyer’s business card and smiled hypocritically. “You came very promptly. Twenty-four hours haven’t passed yet.”

“In these circumstances, the sooner a lawyer gets involved, the better, isn’t that right?” Not to be outdone, the lawyer gave him a fake smile in return. “We’ve come to safeguard the party’s fundamental rights.”

Just then, a weak greeting came from behind them: “Good morning, Captain Luo.”

Luo Wenzhou looked around and saw Xiao Haiyang standing at the door hugging a stack of folders.—The day before he’d been brought to the City Bureau by Tao Ran; today, unexpectedly showing initiative, he’d come himself.

“Perfect.” Luo Wenzhou looked at him and smiled. Pointing behind him, he said to the lawyer, “Why don’t you go and speak to the person in charge of this case?—You there, go on.”

Xiao Haiyang still hadn’t come around from inexplicably having a lawyer thrown full in his face by Luo Wenzhou when the lawyer started pestering him with a string of questions. He was entirely bewildered. “Where…where’s Deputy-Captain Tao?”

Luo Wenzhou smiled benevolently at him. “Tao Ran had some business at home to take care of. He asked for the day off. Xiao Xiao, this case is still your people’s responsibility, after all. You’ll be able to tell it best and clearest.”

Having disposed of Xiao Haiyang and the lawyer, Luo Wenzhou grew serious and turned to Fei Du. “What’s this all about?”

Fei Du raised his eyebrows. “I don’t know. I’m just a driver who hasn’t reached the legal age to marry, come to drop them off on my way.”

Luo Wenzhou rolled his eyes at him, his gaze sweeping over to the stunned Zhang Ting. He got out his phone, clicked a few times, and pulled up a photograph of He Zhongyi. “I’ll make this short. Have you seen this man?”

Presented without warning with a human face, Zhang Ting was startled into backing up. She instinctively hid behind Fei Du.

Fei Du raised his hand to block Luo Wenzhou’s wrist. “Can’t you be a little more polite to a young lady?”

“Zhang Ting.” Fixing a look on Zhang Ting, Luo Wenzhou said in a quiet but severe voice, “This man was killed two nights ago. Your brother is under serious suspicion. This is a homicide inquiry. Every sentence of your testimony is essential. What are you doing hiding behind someone who has nothing to do with this?”

Zhang Ting trembled and clutched Fei Du’s sleeve.

“It’s all right.” Bending slightly, Fei Du spoke next to her ear. “Tingting, tell the truth. Captain Luo thinks the same as I do. We both believe your brother can’t be involved in this.”

Perhaps taking some comfort from him, Zhang Ting hesitated a moment, then took the phone from Luo Wenzhou’s hand. For a long time she couldn’t calm down and nearly bit her thumbnail down to the quick. Then she nodded irresolutely. “The photograph doesn’t

look very like him…but I think I did see him. I have an internship at the Economic and Trade Center. One day I went downstairs to buy bubble tea and ran into a weird person."

She pointed at the photograph on Luo Wenzhou's phone. "It was this person. He stopped me and asked whether I knew someone called 'Fengniange.'"

CHAPTER 12 - Julien XI

Luo Wenzhou looked fixedly into her eyes. “Surname Feng, full name ‘Feng Nian,’ or ‘Feng Niange?’”

“I don’t know… That’s what it sounded like, but he had a bit of an accent, I don’t know what the characters were, or even if the last character was a form of address or part of the name,” said Zhang Ting numbly. “It was already late that day, and he suddenly jumped out, smiling so fawningly and saying weird things. He seemed a little crazy, and I didn’t have anyone with me; I was a little scared, so I kept saying, ‘I don’t know him.’ I wanted to go around him…”

“When did this happen?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

“A while ago,” said Zhang Ting. “A while ago there was a kind of mentally unstable flasher running around near our company. A lot of people had seen him. Our boss even didn’t dare to have us work overtime, but I happened to have something to finish that day, so I stayed a while. By the time I got downstairs there weren’t many people around, so I was a little scared to start with… Otherwise I wouldn’t have called my brother to come pick me up.”

Fei Du remembered the delivery man he’d met at the coffee shop and suddenly couldn’t quite understand something. Thereupon he couldn’t resist putting in a word. “And then? Did he pester you?”

Zhang Ting nodded. “I saw my brother had come, so I went around him to cross the street to go meet them, but he suddenly started following me for some reason. I was panicking a little, so I ran a few steps and loudly said, ‘Who are you, I don’t know you,’ and they heard. My brother may have thought he was harassing me, so he came over and hit him.”

“He Zhongyi—the man in the photograph, did he fight back?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

“No,” said Zhang Ting, her gaze falling as if she couldn’t quite bear to go on. “He only covered his head and dodged. I saw then that he actually looked pretty young. I thought I’d been too sensitive and quickly stopped my brother.”

Fei Du looked up slightly. “You went to meet…them? Who else was there?”

Zhang Ting said, “My boyfriend was driving. My brother was a little drunk.”

“I see,” said Fei Du, then made a perfectly right and realistic display of disappointment. “How come all the good girls have boyfriends already? Who’s moving so fast?”

Luo Wenzhou frowned at him making such a weird diversion at such a time but didn’t tell him to be quiet.

Zhang Ting blushed a little at his suggestive words. “It’s Rongshun’s Zhao Haochang, don’t you know him, too?”

“The Rongshun Law Firm’s Attorney Zhao?” Fei Du, seemingly inadvertently, looked past her at Luo Wenzhou. “No wonder the lawyer came so promptly.”

Luo Wenzhou asked, “And after that? Did you see He Zhongyi again?”

Zhang Ting shook her head. Looking at Luo Wenzhou, she stammered out, “Captain Luo, my brother couldn’t have killed someone.”

Luo Wenzhou's expression relaxed. He said to Zhang Ting, "If your brother hasn't done anything wrong, we won't unjustly accuse him. Even if we were so unreasonable that we wanted to pick someone at random to unjustly accuse, we still couldn't pick our old director-general's relative, right? Rest assured: since your brother couldn't have killed anyone, nothing will happen to him here."

Zhang Ting heard him, but it was no use—the useless Zhang Donglai really wasn't easy to handle. So while she'd said he "couldn't have," inside she wasn't so sure.

"Go in and give them a statement," said Luo Wenzhou. "I'll have Lang Qiao come. You just tell her the truth. It'll be all right."

Before he had finished speaking, Fei Du had already moved slightly in front of Zhang Ting and beckoned to her like he was coaxing a child. He quietly said, "Don't be afraid. I'll come with you."

This conduct of waiting hand and foot on someone else's little sister really made it seem like *he* was the "brother-in-law." Luo Wenzhou couldn't stand this degenerate bourgeois lifestyle of chatting up girls for no reason. He wanted to sneer, but he was afraid of upsetting Zhang Ting again, so he had to let it go.

Fei Du accompanied Zhang Ting into the City Bureau and sat waiting outside holding a paper cup while she was giving her statement.

After a moment, Luo Wenzhou strolled over and sat next to him. "You people, calling in lawyers at the first sign of trouble. It puts us in an awkward position."

"I didn't tell them to call a lawyer," said Fei Du. Just when Luo Wenzhou was thinking in wonder that he would actually use human speech to defend himself, he quickly added another sentence that

didn't sound so sensible. "If Zhang Donglai had killed someone and I wanted to get him out of it, I'd have no need for this useless lawyer; I'd give you another murderer."

When he spoke with Tao Ran, Fei Du was forever showing a sound and law-abiding aspect; speaking to him, however, it was forever the wretched and grim aspect, defying laws human and divine. Neither end seemed especially like the truth, anyway; Luo Wenzhou didn't know when he was just running his mouth and when he was telling the truth.

"You believe that money is all-powerful," said Luo Wenzhou, his expression stern and grave but his voice indolent, his manner lying somewhere between joking and proper. "Comrade, your views are very dangerous."

"If it isn't all-powerful, that's only because you don't have enough money." Fei Du's expression didn't alter. He changed the subject: "Where's Tao Ran?"

"Much obliged to President Fei for showing us the way," said Luo Wenzhou, "but the manner of showing it could stand discussion. It can't serve as evidence in court. I had to send him to find some evidence we could use. Otherwise when that lawyer you people brought forces us to release Zhang Donglai, will we have to release him or not?"

This speech was very indistinct; it sounded very much like he was giving a spy's countersign. Had the walls had ears, they would probably still have been all at sea. Fei Du, however, knew that he was talking about the cigarette ends—though he had promptly brought the cigarette ends over, in the end they were still objects of unknown origin. Even if Luo Wenzhou trusted him, the collegiate bench wouldn't. The police had to follow his clue to find other traces.

“Even if I hadn’t touched them, you wouldn’t have been in time to get them. You wouldn’t even be able to determine whether that person was the victim.” Fei Du shrugged. “Someone once said to me that ‘everything that happens in this world leaves traces,’ but whether you can find them depends on each side’s luck. Is your luck good this time?”

Luo Wenzhou suddenly froze. The blow-for-blow probing, bantering, and hinting vanished utterly from his face. For an instant the corners of his mouth were even pulled a little tight.

Luo Wenzhou subconsciously got his cigarettes out of his pocket, thought of something, and put them back.

Instantly there was deep silence between the two of them. Neither looked at the other. They only sat side by side with a distance of about one meter between them, like complete strangers.

“The windows and doors were locked. None of the rooms showed signs of forced entry. The most advanced security system of the time was entirely untouched.” Luo Wenzhou abruptly opened his mouth to speak, his voice very low and his speech very fast, as if he had already recited these words many times and could smoothly say them without missing a single punctuation mark.

“She had done her makeup and changed her clothes, even put on music. The scene had a certain feeling of ritual. There was a suicide note arranged on the writing desk next to her. It was analyzed, the handwriting confirmed to belong to the deceased. The person who had written the letter showed clear depressive tendencies, which tallied with her daily use of antidepressant medication. The deceased was an adult, with no illness or injury that may have led her to be unable to act for herself. No drugs sufficient to cause unconsciousness were found in her system. There were also no

defensive wounds on her body.—That's all the evidence we collected at the time. You were the one who reported the case. You reached the scene before we did. Unless you want to tell me that you hid some evidence back then, it was without a doubt a suicide."

Fei Du didn't speak. His sitting posture seemed very relaxed—legs crossed, upper body leaning forward slightly, one hand casually lying on his knee and the other holding a paper cup that was no longer steaming. His long and slender fingers were tapping out a beat on the rim of the cup, as if there was a melody no one else could hear filling the air.

"I said to you then, 'Everything that happens in this world leaves traces, as long as it's real. Without traces to support your opinion, however much you believe in it, it's still only a dead end of the imagination.' Fei Du, you may have had a certain intuition, but we can't do our job based on intuition. My intuition tells me every day that I can make five million." Luo Wenzhou's gaze stopped on Fei Du's fingers. Then, in an almost callously objective tone, he said, "And you know, there's a theory abroad that says that if a person wants to kill herself, she may suddenly use some means to confess it to the people close to her—you heard her confession back then."

Fei Du's fingers suddenly stiffened.

Luo Wenzhou reached out his arm, pulled the paper cup out of his hand and put it aside. "If you really want to talk over this case with me, I maintain my judgment to this day—but it doesn't matter whose judgment it is. That isn't important anymore. She's been dead for seven years. When the coffin is closed, you can judge a person's life. The relevant evidence has all disappeared. This isn't going to sound good, but if she's reincarnated she'll already be attending primary school. The living can cling on without letting go; it's a form of emotional sustenance. But there's no sense in blindly clinging to the wrong course."

Maintaining his original posture, Fei Du sat without moving a muscle, as if he had turned into a statue.

Just then, Zhang Ting and the lawyer came out side by side, and Fei Du's gaze moved slightly, giving off a trace of living energy.

"I don't accept your conclusion, Officer Luo," said Fei Du.

Hearing this, Luo Wenzhou wasn't at all taken aback. He only shrugged.

Fei Du adjusted his jacket and stood to meet Zhang Ting and the lawyer. He looked down at Luo Wenzhou. There was no smile on his face; his expression was even somewhat somber. "But perhaps there's some merit in your heartfelt advice."

Luo Wenzhou was surprised, but after saying this, Fei Du once again put on his graceful mask and left with Zhang Ting. They didn't have any further interaction.

Fei Du had just opened the car door for Zhang Ting when he saw a car with police plates stop at the gate of the City Bureau. The driver got out first, pointed to the City Bureau, and said a few words. Next, a thin, middle-aged woman staggered out of the car. Her mouth was open, her face both frightened and dazed.

Her fingers clutched the car door. The printed cotton of her pants trembled faintly around her legs, which were as thin as sesame stalks.

The driver closed the car door and, half-supporting, half-pushing, took the woman towards Yan City's City Bureau.

Clutching the hand of the person next to her as if it were her last

hope, the woman walked a few trembling steps, then slowly crouched down and let out a breathless-sounding sob. Then she stopped for a moment before beginning to wail hysterically. All the people passing in the street stopped; some even got out their phones.

Fei Du's brow creased lightly. He heard the lawyer chattering to Zhang Ting: "Their so-called 'serious suspicion' has no evidence to support it. Miss Zhang, set your mind at ease. I'll stay here to keep an eye on things. When the time comes, they'll have to release him."

"He Zhongyi's mother suffers from uremia. She has to go for dialysis constantly. He was the family's only source of income," Lang Qiao was saying quickly next to Luo Wenzhou. The sound of the woman's crying had the power to penetrate into the City Bureau and echo. Lang Qiao frowned as if she couldn't quite bear it. "Will she be all right crying like this? She's already sick, I don't want something else to happen."

Luo Wenzhou didn't have time to answer.

Another officer from the Criminal Investigation Team came trotting over. "Chief, the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau has sent in a request. Because the murderer is suspected of having moved the corpse, the original scene of the crime is unclear, and the sub-bureau's jurisdictional powers are limited, they want to pass the '520' case on to us."

"Captain Luo, the lawyer Zhang Ting brought keeps questioning our procedure for taking the suspect into custody. We didn't have enough evidence to arrest Zhang Donglai. Should we release him?"

"Chief Luo…"

Luo Wenzhou pressed his hand down, pressing down everyone's simultaneous talk.

Amidst the sound of He Zhongyi's mother crying, he picked up his phone. "Tao Ran, go ahead."

"Wenzhou, I've got the surveillance footage for the Number 34."

CHAPTER 13 - Julien XII

“Around ten past nine, He Zhongyi got on the Number 34 bus at the East Nanping Road stop. When the Number 34 arrived at the Wenchang Intersection stop twenty-some minutes later, He Zhongyi got off. A security camera near Wenchang Intersection caught his back. Several minutes later he walked out of range of the security cameras. He didn’t show up again.”

Luo Wenzhou had grown up in Yan City. When he heard the names, he understood the approximate location.

Wenchang Street was to the southeast of the Flower Market District commercial center—in other words, after leaving Chengguang Mansion, the victim had not only not gone home, he had gone even further in the opposite direction.

“I’m at Wenchang Intersection now,” Tao Ran said over the phone amid the noisy din of traffic. “So at any rate He Zhongyi wasn’t in the West District between nine and nine-thirty. The argument the people living around there heard at the time wasn’t related to the homicide. Ma Xiaowei was wronged. What was Wang Hongliang doing snatching him up in such a hurry? If I didn’t know better, I’d think the police had killed He Zhongyi and wanted to find someone to take the blame.”

“Captain Luo.” Just then, a criminal policeman ran over and passed Luo Wenzhou a stack of materials. “The medical examiners have sent over their report. They’ve deduced that the victim He Zhongyi’s approximate time of death was between 9 PM and 10 PM on the night of May 20th.”

“Between 9 PM and 10 PM.” Luo Wenzhou took the report and flipped through it. He didn’t respond to Tao Ran’s suspicions.

“According to this conclusion, there’s a great likelihood that He Zhongyi was murdered not long after getting off the bus.”

Tao Ran must have found a quiet place. The noise coming over the phone decreased significantly. “Around nine, Chengguang Mansion’s dinner party was just ending. Zhang Donglai went outside; the security cameras in the courtyard caught his face for the first time. He stayed in the courtyard for a while, then went back indoors. At 9:45, the cameras in the courtyard caught him again. He spoke to a girl for a bit, and then they went into the woods holding hands.”

Luo Wenzhou sighed. “I see Young Master Zhang’s itinerary was really crowded. He must have been so busy he didn’t have time to spare to kill anyone.”

“If he doesn’t have an identical twin, Zhang Donglai is cleared of suspicion. Should we release him?”

Luo Wenzhou declined to comment. He asked, “What else did you turn up?”

“There’s also a cell phone record,” said Tao Ran. “Let me tell you, this is a strange thing.—Didn’t the victim get a phone call while he was waiting outside Chengguang Mansion? I got his number from his roommate and went to investigate his phone records. On the night of the twentieth, He Zhongyi called an unregistered number several times.”

“Oh?” Luo Wenzhou raised his brows. “What’s strange about that? Hadn’t we already determined that the victim must have known the killer?”

Tao Ran said, “The strange thing isn’t the phone calls.—That night around 9:50, He Zhongyi’s phone received a text message from

another untraceable number. The contents are: ‘Location of settling accounts changed to Golden Triangle Lot, May 20.’—What do you think that means? Settling accounts? Settling what accounts? Settling them with whom? What is the ‘Golden Triangle’ Lot? I feel like that name sounds a little…”

Luo Wenzhou suddenly opened his mouth to interrupt him. “Don’t worry about that for now. Wenchang Street is at the heart of the old city sector. There are a lot of people, and past nine isn’t very late. Take some guys to go ask around, see if there’s anyone who may have seen him.”

Tao Ran froze. Before he could say anything, Luo Wenzhou had already hurriedly hung up the phone. He couldn’t resist frowning at his cell phone.—Before, Tao Ran had thought that Wang Hongliang only got up to simple tricks like shifting responsibility, enjoying the benefits of his position without doing any of the work. Therefore, in order to prevent him from obstructing the course of the investigation with his lax methods, they would have to find a pretext to bring him down.

But now Tao Ran was dimly becoming aware that this case had more to it than politics.

The City Bureau’s Criminal Investigation Team’s movements were very orderly. Less than an hour later, the criminal policemen took up their positions, got their marching orders, and began asking around everywhere, carrying a clear close-up photograph of He Zhongyi.

This type of work was ordinarily one of the criminal policemen’s daily activities. It had to be done. It was extremely time-consuming and dull, about as miserable a process as handing out leaflets by the road. They had to repeat the same words countless times, and whether they would succeed in tracking down any trace depended

entirely on luck.

Because eyes aren't camera lenses; they can't retain an impression of every person they see.

And this city was too big. Everyone went around and around in the powerful current, leaving early and coming back late—most neighbors were only on nodding terms; on public transportation there was only a field of lowered heads. Through a palm-sized screen, people could observe the farce going on on the far side of the great ocean, explore fantastic stories from furthest north to furthest south, participate in all the big and small trending discussions taking place over 9.6 million square kilometers[26]; every hour and every minute, they were amazingly busy. Of course they didn't have time to spare to remember one unfashionably dressed worker.

Because he really was too ordinary, too dull, not worth paying any attention to, and not worthy of temporarily existing in anyone's memories.

Dead or alive.

This time, the police force's luck had run out. Tao Ran and the others worked with the sun beating down on them, and when the sun had rolled down behind the mountains, they were still empty-handed.

"Deputy-Captain, they say they haven't seen him over here."

"Deputy Tao, we made inquiries on the street to the west, pulled up all the security cameras from the stores facing the street and watched them one by one. Guess what we got—nothing."

"There's an old man who said he may have seen him. I asked which

way he went, and he pointed me towards a construction site."

Up to this point, they hadn't been able to connect the threads to show where He Zhongyi had gone after getting off the bus, nor where he had been murdered.

This young man, not twenty years old, had come to enormous Yan City less than a year ago. On the silent film of the security cameras, he had travelled an arc around the center of the city and then disappeared without a trace, dying in some unknown corner.

And when he was dead, his body still hadn't been allowed to rest. In a bizarre course of events, it had been transported, brought all the way back to the West Flower Market District—he had gone back to where he'd come from, making no impact on the flourishing sector's urban activities.

Tao Ran was at his wit's end. He had no choice but to disband the throng of criminal policemen who had been roasted by the scorching sun until oil was pouring out of them, then briefly report to Luo Wenzhou that they had failed to make any advances in their work.

"I figure I've made no headway here," said Tao Ran. "I think we ought to go back and perform an analysis of the victim… Are you out somewhere?"

Luo Wenzhou seemed to be in someone's car just now, because the sound of a car radio reporting on the road conditions was coming through the phone. The anchor was just using the process of elimination to describe "all the places in the city without a traffic jam" during the evening rush hour.

Luo Wenzhou agreed indistinctly, paused, then turned off the radio. "Or you could think of some way to keep following up on the Zhang

Donglai thread."

"Zhang Donglai?" Tao Ran had been talking all day; his throat was steaming, and his brain was a little foggy. He blankly asked, "Hasn't he already been virtually cleared of suspicion?"

"Zhang Ting said that when He Zhongyi stopped her, he asked her about a mysterious individual surnamed 'Feng.' If He Zhongyi hadn't incorrectly identified him, then this mysterious individual has likely crossed paths with Zhang Ting and her crowd. Second, I don't know whether you've noticed, He Zhongyi left the area of Chengguang Mansion at about the same time that Zhang Donglai came out of the club into the courtyard for the first time. Zhang Donglai obviously wasn't planning to leave Chengguang Mansion then, so aside from getting a breath of fresh air, why did he go out?"

Tao Ran stared at first, then quickly came around. "There were people who left when the dinner party ended; he went to see them off.—You mean it's likely that the person He Zhongyi wanted to see was among the crowd of people who left then?"

"Ten points, no bonus.—And then there's that suspicious phone. The reason we found Zhang Donglai in the first place yesterday was because of that phone. Going by Zhang Donglai's character, he may not even know how to write the words 'formal apology,' but if the phone didn't come from him, then did the person who gave He Zhongyi the phone do it under Zhang Donglai's name? Or did the victim lie to his friends about it? Why would he tell such a lie?"

Luo Wenzhou had said this much on one breath of air. He took another breath and counseled, "Look, why don't you get off work? Come a little early tomorrow. Before the forty-eight hours run out, question Zhang Donglai again. I'll tell Lang Qiao to take a little team to investigate He Zhongyi."

Before he hung up the phone, Tao Ran suddenly said, “Are you in the West Flower Market District now?”

Luo Wenzhou, who was just sitting in a black cab, paused. With a smile that wasn’t quite a smile, he said, “The only person on earth who can track me is my wife. Taotao, are you sure you want to ask?”

“Are you investigating Wang Hongliang?” Tao Ran ignored his nonsense. Lowering his voice, he said, “I don’t want early promotion, I’m not concerned about how Director Zhang plans to fix Wang Hongliang, and I don’t want to know who’s going to be the next Director-General. But if someone has committed a crime, whatever his position, it’s our responsibility to arrest him.”

“Your responsibility right now is to catch He Zhongyi’s murderer.” Luo Wenzhou laughed. “All right, you little devil, if you have so many questions, let me tell you—I currently only have a suspicion that Wang Hongliang has done something wrong. No matter what his position is, labelling him a criminal based solely on the information contained in one report would be rather sloppy. I’m leading the initial campaign. As soon as I have hard evidence pointing to him, you’ll all have your share of overtime. I won’t leave you out.”

Luo Wenzhou hung up the phone and turned to the black cab’s driver, who was sitting stock still.

The black cab driver hadn’t been willing to tell him his full name. He only called himself “Xiao Zhen.” He was full of mistrust aimed at all the two-legged animals on earth. His gaze met Luo Wenzhou’s in the rearview mirror, and he looked away quickly, pretending that he wasn’t concerned with the subject of his phone call.

Luo Wenzhou said, “This case is currently under investigation. When the investigation is over, you’ll be able to reveal the details as you see fit, but while the investigation is ongoing, I’ll trouble you to keep them secret.”

Xiao Zhen’s gaze flashed. “What are you talking about? I didn’t understand that.”

Luo Wenzhou fixed the young cab driver with a look through his sunglasses. “Last time you told me that your big sister was murdered by Wang Hongliang and his drug trafficking gang. But I went back and looked into it and found that your sister was arrested for prostitution and later died of a drug overdose. Chen Zhen, this touches on the person in charge of public safety for a whole district and all the people working under him. We can’t prosecute based solely on your words.”

When he exposed Chen Zhen’s full name, the young man slammed on the brakes, stopping by the side of the road.

Luo Wenzhou expression didn’t flicker. “You’re parked in violation of traffic regulations. If you get a ticket, I won’t grant you leniency.”

Chen Zhen’s face was ashen, humiliation and anger mingled in his expression. He stared fiercely at Luo Wenzhou. “My sister wasn’t that type of person.”

Luo Wenzhou was entirely unmoved. He knocked on the car window and said one syllable at a time: “E—vi—dence.”

“My sister didn’t have time to tell me anything,” said Chen Zhen. “She wasn’t sleeping at night then, and she was always afraid of something. I asked her, but she would only get mad at me and tell me to mind my own business. I…I overheard her talking to

someone on the phone…”

“Who?”

Chen Zhen rubbed his eyes and quickly shook his head.

Luo Wenzhou passed him a tissue. “Now, have you ever heard of the Golden Triangle Lot?”

Chen Zhen froze.

In the Fei Clan Building, a secretary knocked on the door of Fei Du’s office and went in. “President Fei, Rongshun’s Attorney Zhao is here.”

Fei Du nodded. “Right on time. Ask him to come in.”

Since she had started working for Fei Du, the secretary hadn’t worked overtime. She had also never seen him receive work-related guests at this hour. She couldn’t help feeling a sense of novelty.

Smiling radiantly, she asked the guest to come into Fei Du’s office. She poured tea and surreptitiously examined him. She found that this Attorney Zhao was exquisitely dressed and could be described as tall and handsome, but he had a particular kind of youthfulness about his countenance; the combination of the two factors gave him a particularly pure-hearted quality.

The secretary had always been aware that rich kid Fei shunned neither men nor women, and that he especially liked the quiet and refined, not too forward type; she “saw the light” at once. Before the light had passed, she met Fei Du’s not quite smiling gaze. The secretary stuck out her tongue, then quickly took on the professional discretion of a palace steward calmly kneeling to one side, minding her own business, seeing nothing.

Rongshun were the company's legal advisors engaged in connection with some special projects. Chin in his hand, Fei Du solemnly listened to Attorney Zhao carefully explain several documents fast enough for spit to fly, then mercilessly went off topic: "How is Tingting doing?"

Attorney Zhao paused. He seemed not to have expected that this ignorant and incompetent second generation patriarch wouldn't even be willing to pretend for a while. But he quickly recovered. With his expression unchanging, he put down the materials he had spent so much time preparing. "I hear from my criminal law colleague that the police's evidence was insufficient to make an arrest. President Zhang should be released tomorrow. It'll be all right. Tingting has only suffered a false alarm. Thank you for your concern."

"Tingting isn't the only one I'm concerned about." Fei Du smiled ambiguously at him, the smile containing a thousand words, but he didn't say anything else. "It seems that at the critical moment, knowing talented young people like Attorney Zhao really is very useful.—Would you do me the honor of dining with me?"

Attorney Zhao frowned faintly, as though he was planning to refuse, but Fei Du had already stood up and, brooking no argument, was gesturing at him in invitation.

The Fei Clan was Rongshun's largest client. The two sides had been working together since before Fei Du had taken over. They had always been one of Rongshun's major bankrollers. Zhao Haochang couldn't afford not to defer to him; he very unwillingly stood up.

"I didn't know whether you had any dietary restrictions, so I had them throw something together." Walking ahead of him, Fei Du seemingly carelessly said, "Oh, Haochang, where are you from? Are

you a local?”

This was a very easy to answer bit of idle conversation, but Zhao Haochang was suddenly caught up short. Only when Fei Du noticed something wasn’t right and turned to look at him in surprise did Zhao Haochang finally avoid his gaze and murmur an indistinct “right,” not answering the question either way.

CHAPTER 14 - Julien XII

On May 24th, four days had passed since the young man He Zhongyi was killed.

Wearing gloves, Luo Wenzhou flipped through an old photo album —he had taken it from the black cab driver Chen Zhen.

Chen Zhen and his sister Chen Yuan were twins. They had grown up locally, raised by their grandparents. Afterwards, the elderly couple had passed away one after another; the sister Chen Yuan had tested into university; Chen Zhen's grades were bad, however, so he had simply abandoned school early and gone out to earn money.

The girl in the photographs was very delicately-made, smiling broadly in every picture, revealing a pair of not very symmetrical little canine teeth.

This was the only thing she had left behind. The circumstances of her death had been obscure; due to the undignified manner of it, the police, on the grounds of suspecting the presence of hidden drugs, had searched through her personal possessions several times. Neither Chen Yuan's second-hand computer, nor her cell phone, had been left behind.

Luo Wenzhou flipped through the photo album from beginning to end, his gaze pausing on a few photographs that seemed to be mementos of a university club event. There was a girl in them who seemed very close to Chen Yuan. On the backs of the photographs there was a date written in pencil, and the note: "At the Art of Tea Club with Xiao Cui; glad you were there."

"Xiao Cui." Luo Wenzhou turned to the cell phone record he'd found—about half a month before her death, Chen Yuan had made

a phone call to a user named “Cui Ying.”

Just then, Lang Qiao knocked on the door of his office and beckoned to him, more dead than alive. “Chief, come and watch the moron. Tickets ten yuan each, your money back if he isn’t moronic.”

Yan City’s City Bureau’s Criminal Investigation Team’s appreciation for Young Master Zhang was extraordinary. Out of every ten sentences he said, nine were bullshit. Being detained at the City Bureau for forty-eight hours had boiled off his initially scant brains; it was anyone’s guess what had been left behind in the empty shell. The intellectual level of the words that came out was deeply affecting.

“‘Feng Niange?’ Never heard of ‘em. I don’t know anyone with the surname Feng. Is it a man or a woman? Why don’t you tell me what they look like? I may have slept with them and not remembered the name.”

“Was there anyone I knew at Chengguang Mansion on the night of the twentieth? I knew all of them… What? Who was there? Ow, police uncles. Honorable police uncles! That night I got half a liter of white wine poured into me, I don’t know how many glasses of red, cut with half a dozen of champagne. The Holy Trinity! I was doing all right if I could still remember my own name. How could I tell you everyone who was there?”

“I haven’t quarreled with anyone recently. I’m very friendly. Huh? Hitting people counts? Oh, then I really can’t say… So I hit them, what are they going to do to get back at me? Don’t you know who I am!”

“How many times have I said it, that phone didn’t come from me. I only give gifts to my intimate friends. Anyway, if I were going to

give someone something, it wouldn't be a stupid phone, right? Who are you insulting?"

Aside from spending money and sleeping, Young Master Zhang's daily life was full of chaos; matters big and small passed before his eyes like mist, making absolutely no impact on him; his psychological state could be described as "free of earthly concerns."

Luo Wenzhou listened in for a while and issued a categorical assertion concerning Zhang Donglai. He said, "This child got dropped on his head by his dad when he was little."

With all the patience in the world, Tao Ran tried every possible method to quiz him again and again from each and every angle, yet he was still unable to extract any useful information from Zhang Donglai's carelessly formatted memory.

In a flash, the time came. The lawyer Zhang Ting had found stood at the City Bureau's doors, contending on strong grounds that the Criminal Investigation Team had to release Zhang Donglai.

"There's really nothing I can do." Tao Ran let out two long breaths and helplessly shrugged his shoulders at Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou considered and lightly lifted his chin. "The evidence is insufficient. Let's release him."

"Captain Luo!"

"Chief!"

Lang Qiao pulled at Luo Wenzhou. "Chief, yesterday when He Zhongyi's mom was howling outside, some busybodies filmed her. Now there are a whole bunch of people who think there's no smoke without fire and are waiting to see the fur fly. If you release him

just like that, how will it look when it gets out?"

"We can release Zhang Donglai." Tao Ran thought about it, then proposed, "According to the victim's time of death and last known whereabouts, his alibi is fairly clear-cut…"

"No, don't mention any of that for now. Just say that the evidence is insufficient," said Luo Wenzhou, interrupting him. "Don't announce the details of the investigation. Release him."

Hearing this arbitrary decision, Lang Qiao couldn't help saying, "Chief, have you been infected by Zhang Donglai? If it can infect you through a window, his mental deficiency must be a virulently infectious disease."

Luo Wenzhou rapped once on the back of her head. "Glib, aren't you. Careful you don't get laugh lines."

Meanwhile, Tao Ran muttered quietly to himself for a moment, then thoughtfully said, "You're thinking…"

"Right, starting now, no one is allowed to reveal any details concerning the course of this investigation. Tell them 'the evidence is insufficient, no comment, we're currently once again investigating all of the victim's relationships starting from childhood.'" Luo Wenzhou nodded at Tao Ran, then evenly said, "This is discipline. Anyone leaks, I'll deal with them. Disperse."

A little transient worker had met an unusual death, the City Bureau's Director-General's nephew was a murder suspect, and he had been quickly set free due to "insufficient evidence"—this news was even more explosive than Lang Qiao and the others had been afraid of. Before the procedures for setting Zhang Donglai free had been finalized, all kinds of print and digital media were already staking out the City Bureau's doors.

The Criminal Investigation Team's phones were like a hotline, ringing one after another, wave after wave. Even Director Zhang's replacement Director Lu was alarmed and called Luo Wenzhou in to question him.

Director Lu looked out the window at the people crowding outside the reception area. With a rather grave expression, he asked Luo Wenzhou, "Are you sure you can handle it?"

Luo Wenzhou smiled at him without the least shred of concern. "I'm on the job, and you're still worried?"

Director Lu rolled his eyes at him. "When you want to let out some line to hook your fish, you have to be careful not to let it slip away. —The city's higher-ups are sure to put pressure on us for the next few days. I'll hold them off for you, and you can do as you see fit."

"Thank you, Uncle Lu." Luo Wenzhou thought, then lowered his voice slightly. "You can relax about Wang Hongliang, too. People just haven't been looking into him for the past few years. I don't believe anyone can blot out the sky with one hand."

Director Lu pursed his lips and turned serious, looking at him. "As long as you can verify that the substance of that report is true, it doesn't matter how extensive his network is or who is protecting him. As long as Lao Zhang and I are still here, we'll be able to handle him.—And you be careful, you hear me?"

Luo Wenzhou came downstairs just in time to run headfirst into Zhang Donglai's "group of family and friends."

In order to minimize the social impact, the Zhang family hadn't sent their people to come pick him up; they only had Zhang Ting show her face, wanting to be as low-key as possible.

But things unexpectedly turned out contrary to their wishes. Children are a debt: Zhang Donglai's crowd of disreputable companions had somehow gotten wind; wanting nothing but to see the world in chaos, they ran over to the City Bureau as a group. Several luxury cars parked at the City Bureau's doors and several gorgeously dressed young men and women made brilliant appearances, though it was unclear whether they had come to mount the stage or makes fools of themselves.

The lawyer rolled up his sleeves and went in first to scoop up Zhang Donglai, while Zhao Haochang didn't budge from Zhang Ting's side —among Zhang Donglai's crowd of good-for-nothing friends, the young couple stood out, refreshing and refined, simple and honest.

Fei Du was of course present as well, though this time he had come purely as an outside observer and was unobtrusively standing behind Zhang Ting. When Luo Wenzhou saw him, he was wearing his beast in human clothing get-up, earbuds stuck in his ears, completely absorbed in playing a game on a very old model PSP.

Luo Wenzhou had meant to bundle up the forces of evil and throw them out, but when his gaze fell on Fei Du's scratched-up old game machine, his expression suddenly relaxed. In a groundbreaking occurrence, he didn't open his mouth to pick a fight; almost gently and peacefully, he strolled over beside Fei Du, taking a deep breath to mentally prepare himself—even if he saw the brat playing some violent and bloody assault game, he had determined he would maintain his emotional stability.

But after spending so much time preparing, when he looked over at the screen of Fei Du's old game machine, he saw a crowd of charmingly naive "big-eyed lamps" running around—this domineering director-general was enthusiastically playing Patapon.

Luo Wenzhou: "…"

While Fei Du was surmounting all difficulties on his path to victory, Zhang Donglai at last breezed out. Before he'd even made his way out of the police station, he was already beside himself with joy and loudly proclaimed, "All of you here today are my brothers who have passed through life and death with me. If there's anything you need in the future, just say the word. I, your brother, will be pierced from both sides by knives for you, pierced until I turn into a knife block!"

Fei Du's big-eyed legion had been progressing steadily, but this bloodthirsty cry knocked them off tempo; the drumbeat skipped, and the troops were at once defeated in a landslide.

Luo Wenzhou held back until he got a "Game Over," then slowly spoke: "It's always perplexed me a little, why you'd hang out with Zhang Donglai and his ilk."

Fei Du shot a glance at him and calmly stuck the game machine in his pocket. "Because I think he lives especially philosophically."

Luo Wenzhou was unable to distinguish whether these words had a positive or negative connotation.

Fei Du waved a hand at Zhang Donglai, who was running over to him, turned to give Luo Wenzhou an artificial smile, then went to talk to Tao Ran.

The crowd of young masters swaggered out of the City Bureau; even thinking with your toenail, you could imagine how this excited the media lurking outside.

Lang Qiao seemed to have seen the next week's worth of trending topics. She couldn't resist covering her eyes with her hand and

quietly saying to Tao Ran, “I can’t look.”

“Then don’t look,” said Tao Ran. “Get to work.”

When the young masters had just walked out through the gates, without warning a figure suddenly burst out among Zhang Donglai’s group of friends and relatives.

She was small and skinny, her hair withered and yellow. This was He Zhongyi’s mother.

The leading wastrels looked in helpless bewilderment at this comically dressed woman. Someone quietly said, “Who’s that?”

He Zhongyi’s mother’s eyes were dry and bloodshot; they swept over these people’s faces. Her lips trembled violently, and a voice as indistinct as a kitten’s came out of her throat: “Who killed my son?”

Her pronunciation was unclear and her accent was heavy. Only when she had repeated herself three or four times did they understand what she was saying.

Zhang Donglai’s expression sank slightly. He rather calamitously said, “Who knows? It wasn’t me, anyway.”

Then he looked down, avoided the woman’s line of sight, and started walking away, brushing past her. His group of friends and family followed closely after him, splitting into two halves as though they were avoiding the plague, keeping away from the woman as much as they could.

“Is that woman a little insane?”

“Quiet, she’s a little pitiful.”

“And being stuck in a little dark room for no earthly reason isn’t sad?”

“I’m telling you, I’m nearly on Dou E[27]’s level, I didn’t even know her son…”

The woman stood blankly where she was, hazily looking at the people walking by her without touching her. “Who killed my son? You…all of you, you can’t go…”

Seeing that this crowd of people was about to walk away from in front of her eyes, the woman panicked, clawing wildly at the air, accidentally catching a girl’s hair.

The girl shrieked as if she’d had her tail stepped on, snatched back her hair and clutched it in front of her chest. She leapt away and hid behind a friend. A young man next to her instinctively reached out to block the woman. “What are you doing! Are you crazy!”

The woman bumped into his solid arm and fell to the ground, bumping into Fei Du, who was bringing up the rear.

Fei Du had been saying goodbye to Tao Ran. Being bumped into unexpectedly, he was startled and took half a step back.

Before he could react, she reached out a hand like a chicken’s claw and desperately grabbed Fei Du’s costly pant leg like she was grasping at her last hope. Over and over, she said, “You can’t go, you can’t go! You owe me an answer… You can’t go…”

A few policemen went over wanting to pull her off, and the young man who had knocked her down came over as well, frowning. “Master Fei…”

Wrongly attacked, Fei Du frowned as he looked at the woman

clinging to him, then awkwardly patted her shoulder. “Would you like to stand up?”

The woman suddenly looked up, her gaze locking with Fei Du’s. She was sobbing, tears running down her face. Her appearance really wasn’t very dignified, powerful grief having turned her into a heap of mud.

Fei Du suddenly froze, seeing someone else in her eyes.

He bent, very gently took hold of the woman’s shoulders, and lifted her back to her feet. He waved a hand at Zhong Donglai and the others. “You guys go on ahead.”

CHAPTER 15 - Julien XIV

“I hate doing an analysis of the victim the most.” Lang Qiao pouted, holding her pen between her nose and mouth. “Sometimes the victim was killed for no reason, and I can’t let it go for a long time. I keep saying, Why? Why did a perfectly nice person run into some bad luck and end up like this? Why did someone who’d worked hard all his life, struggled for years, at the very last get finished off by some scumbag coming out of nowhere? But when the victim wasn’t innocent, or he was simply guilty and deserved to be punished, I think he had it coming, and us tracking down the murderer for him is just giving succor to the enemy, and I…ouch!”

Luo Wenzhou had rolled a document into a paper tube and hit her on the back of the head, breaking off Lang Qiao’s long-winded speech.

Lang Qiao held the back of her head. “What are you hitting me for? Everything I’m saying is normal human feelings. Police are human, too!”

“Do you want your salary?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

Lang Qiao said, “…Yes.”

“If you want it, then do your job. What’s all this pontificating for?” Luo Wenzhou pulled over a whiteboard. Under a photograph of the young man with a moon-shaped scar on his forehead, he wrote: “He Zhongyi, male, eighteen years old, delivery man, H Province native” and other such basic facts.

Then, taking advantage of his height, he looked over the little whiteboard and through the office’s clear glass window at Fei Du keeping He Zhongyi’s mother company.

Having heard some wild talk, Mother He had felt very desperate over the City Bureau setting Zhang Donglai free. As if determining that she had nowhere left to turn for help, she'd cried herself to the point of collapse; she had been hardly able to walk upright. She had been propped up by Fei Du on the way in.

Perhaps she had instinctively clutched at a straw, or perhaps she'd determined that Fei Du was part of Zhang Donglai's group, so she "couldn't let him get away"; when Mother He's mind had gone blank, she'd subconsciously tightened her hold on to Fei Du's clothes.

Fei Du had been dramatically forced to stay, leading to the scene outside the window.

Fei Du was a young man, after all. If he'd wanted to forcefully shake off this chronically ill woman who barely reached his chest, it would have been easy. But contrary to expectations, he hadn't flared up; he'd only calmly sat with this old and ugly woman.

By now Mother He had already come back from the exhaustion of her collapse and recovered some metal faculties. Luo Wenzhou watched as Fei Du held her hand and bent down, quietly discussing something with her. Whatever fine words he was using, they were actually making Mother He slowly calm down; she was even occasionally able to nod or shake her head in response.

"Has Ma Xiaowei been released?" Luo Wenzhou asked, looking out the window.

Tao Ran put down the phone. "No, the person I talked to at the sub-bureau says that Ma Xiaowei started going into withdrawal over there. The civil police went to search his residence and turned up a good deal of loose drugs, so they've kept him under arrest."

“Can we get him over here for questioning?” said Luo Wenzhou.

Tao Ran shrugged. “No. They say his condition is very unstable. If something happens, the sub-bureau won’t be able to shoulder the responsibility. If we really want to question him, we’ll have to send someone to the sub-bureau to question him there.”

Wang Hongliang had settled on the idea of not letting anyone speak to Ma Xiaowei alone. To this end, he was giving the teenager the treatment of a relic in a museum—others were only permitted to look at him through a window; if they wanted to take him away, there was no door.

Just then, two policemen from the Criminal Investigation Team came in, carrying a cardboard box. “Chief, we brought over all of He Zhongyi’s personal possessions. When we’ve finished investigating, we can return them to the victim’s relation. There may be something useful.”

He Zhongyi had few personal possessions. There was some clothing —mostly the standard delivery uniforms handed out to all workers —some extremely basic daily necessities, the cell phone packaging he hadn’t been able to bring himself to throw away, and a diary.

It was called a diary, but it really didn’t have the contents of one; it was basically a ledger and record book.

Aside from being a delivery man, He Zhongyi must also frequently have done short-term temporary work. There were scattered bits of income all over. Scraped together, his monthly income could measure up to that of a white collar worker.

The ledger was kept very carefully; even things like spending 2.5 yuan to buy breakfast were recorded. Luo Wenzhou flipped through

a few pages, then suddenly paused. “What did the piece of paper stuck to the victim’s head look like? Let me see it.”

Someone next to him quickly got out a close-up photograph and passed it to him.

The character “money” was crooked, written in unprepossessing childish handwriting. The right-hand hook was very large, almost occupying the territory of the whole character and looking very uncoordinated—it was identical to the character “money” written in He Zhongyi’s ledger.

“This character is in the victim’s own handwriting.” Tao Ran paused. “Hold up, I remember that when He Zhongyi was waiting outside Chengguang Mansion that night, he was holding a kraft-paper envelope. Could the pierce of paper have come from the envelope? We never found that kraft-paper envelope. What was in it?”

Luo Wenzhou quickly skimmed through He Zhongyi’s notebook. “Could it have been cash? Look here.”

Outside the window, Fei Du was nodding in agreement. “The money to pay for your treatment really was considerable. But back then he must have only just come to Yan City, just started working. Where did he get so much money?”

Hoarsely, Mother He said in a low voice, “He said he got an advance from his fixture.”

“Fixture?” Fei Du wasn’t very familiar with this usage of the word; he only came around after a pause. “You mean the place he worked at?”

Mother He’s health was poor; she was a village woman who rarely

had contact with the outside world. She didn't understand the employment relationships of manual laborers with their temporary and toilsome work—many people earned just enough to live to the next day; bosses and workers each suspected that the other could run off at any time. A boss who was willing to give a worker an advance on his wages was basically engaging in charity.

But even if a boss was accumulating merit by doing good deeds and so was willing to help out in an emergency, giving an advance on a month or two's wages would already be very kind. The money to pay for Mother He's treatment, however, would probably make up a few years of a delivery man's wages.

There was no way selling physical labor could repay such an enormous favor, but selling one's body would just about cover it.

But when President Fei, who had some understanding of male beauty, objectively recalled the briefly-glimpsed He Zhongyi, he thought that based solely on looks, that young man really wouldn't be worth such a price.

So who had lent him the money? Why hadn't he told even his own mother the truth?

There was a debt of 100,000 yuan recorded in He Zhongyi's ledger, but there was absolutely no explanation of where this mysterious debt had come from. With regards to this, the City Bureau's criminal policemen all went into action, spending the better part of the day questioning He Zhongyi's coworkers and acquaintances. Everyone they asked was totally bewildered; they not only didn't admit to lending him the money, each in turn also said that they hadn't even known about him borrowing it.

When Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran returned to the City Bureau, they found Mother He curled up on some chairs, sleeping. Fei Du had

gotten a thin blanket from someone and put it over her.

Tao Ran went over and, keeping his voice low, asked, “Why’s she sleeping here?”

“I said I could take her to a hotel, but she didn’t want to. She insists on waiting until you’ve caught the murderer.” Fei Du looked up and saw that Tao Ran’s forehead was covered in sweat. He frowned, got a tissue out of his pocket and handed it over. “Do you always work this hard? It makes my heart ache to see it.”

Before Tao Ran could answer, next to him, Luo Wenzhou coolly said, “This is what it’s like for the people’s police. If your heart aches, pay some more taxes and don’t make so much trouble. Though, now that I think of it, President Fei, don’t you domineering director-generals have a myriad of business affairs to attend to? How come you always seem so idle?”

Fei Du smiled slightly. “I don’t keep my crew of professional managers around just so they can run their mouths. I’m truly very grateful for Officer Luo’s concern for the security of my financial affairs, but it’s really not necessary. Even if I threw away all my family’s property, the interest I collect on the spare change left in the bank would still be more money than you’ll earn in your lifetime.”

Tao Ran: “…”

As expected, these two mental deficients couldn’t keep the peace for three minutes at a time before they were fucking at it again.

Grabbing one with each hand, he forcibly pulled the two fighting cocks apart. With one hand, he dragged Luo Wenzhou into the office; with the other, he pointed warningly at Fei Du.

Not finding this at all uncongenial, Fei Du very suggestively grabbed his finger.

Luo Wenzhou lost his temper. “That little…”

Tao Ran closed the office door and very helplessly said, “In a while when I get off work, you two can make a date to go fight it out to your heart’s content.”

Luo Wenzhou acutely picked out some implication behind these words. “Oh? You have something after work today?”

Tao Ran turned and looked at him. “I have a blind date[28].”

Luo Wenzhou was stunned.

Tao Ran patted his shoulder. “I’ve reached the age where I can’t keep you company as a bachelor anymore.”

Luo Wenzhou’s gaze flickered to the floor. He muttered to himself for a moment, then smiled. Pointing at Tao Ran, he said, “You traitor! Going and selling out the club without so much as a by-your-leave. Our undying ‘Drop Dead League’ will never let you off.”

Tao Ran considered. “Then I’ll bribe you—when I have a child, I’ll make you the godfather.”

“No,” said Luo Wenzhou, waving his hand. “One Luo Yiguo is enough for me. I don’t have a craving for fatherhood. The future of the nation will have to rely on the strenuous exertions of you straight people.—All right, if you have something to do, go do it. You won’t find any clues by wasting your time here, anyway. If the murderer is close to Zhang Donglai and following the course of the investigation, I figure he’ll act soon. We’ll investigate while we wait.”

Tao Ran shook his head, gathered up his things, and was about to leave when from behind him Luo Wenzhou suddenly called him to a stop.

“With you betraying the club, I really feel a little like I’ve been jilted,” Luo Wenzhou whispered. “Right, mortgage slave, do you want to borrow a car?”

“Get out!” said Tao Ran.

That evening, Zhang Donglai heard the whole course of his getting into and getting out of the little dark room from Zhang Ting. He thought that most of the credit in this belonged to the lawyer, so he went home, took up a pomelo leaf, bathed, then that very day asked the lawyer to a one-on-one dinner.

Compared to their fellow professionals who performed non-litigation legal services for all the great bankrollers, criminal lawyers had high risk, high stress jobs that didn’t pay very much. It was truly very rare to run into an uncomplicated case like this one, with a client who had more money than brains. If not for the fact that he’d gone to school with Zhao Haochang, this kind of good fortune wouldn’t have come his way, either; the lawyer cheerfully kept the date.

Zhang Donglai very politely gave him a red packet. He’d said at first that he would drive the lawyer home, but when they’d just left the restaurant, they ran into a great beauty who greeted Zhang Donglai very familiarly, then in a very natural manner got into Zhang Donglai’s car.

The lawyer didn’t think it would be very good to get too to close them making eyes at each other, so he tactfully sat in the last row of seats, then said that he only needed to be dropped off at the

nearest subway station.

In the car, the beautiful woman and Zhang Donglai shamelessly went back and forth in a way that would make any onlooker feel like he was sitting on pins and needles. The lawyer's face wasn't so thick; he could only pretend to be a bit of empty space, leaning back and fiddling with his phone. While driving through an intersection, Zhang Donglai slammed on the brakes a little forcefully, and the lawyer went pitching forward; out of the corner of his eye, he seemed to see something in a corner.

The lawyer thought it was something that had been knocked off the seat by the stop just now. He decided to pick it up and had just bent down when he abruptly froze.

He saw that it was a striped silver-gray tie, its tail still bearing a famous brand's label. It was of superior make, but it seemed to have been mistreated; it had been rolled up into a shape like a piece of dried fish and stuck in the gap between the seats in the back row.

"There was blunt force trauma to the back of the victim's head, and he was asphyxiated; the murder weapon was a piece of soft cloth, possibly a silk scarf, a necktie, a soft rope and so on…"

The lawyer had had a bit to drink. At this moment, the alcohol evaporated from his open pores in an exhalation.

Just then, Zhang Donglai seemed to finally remember that there was a living creature in the backseat. While he got the car moving, he turned back to look at him. "Attorney Liu, why are you bending over? Did you have too much to drink, or does your stomach hurt?"

The lawyer hurriedly straightened up, all the blood in his body fighting to get to his head first. His limbs went cold, his ears roared, and he forced out a smile. "I…I'm a little dizzy."

Zhang Donglai looked at him in the rearview mirror. Perhaps it was the light, but Attorney Liu felt that there was something sinister in his look.

Luckily Zhang Donglai didn't take much notice of him. He only looked at him a couple of times, then quickly devoted himself whole-heartedly to flirtatious banter with the great beauty next to him. Attorney Liu stiffly maintained his posture, opened the camera on his phone, and sneakily took a picture of the place where he'd found the tie. Then he stretched out his foot bit by bit and used the tip to pull the tie out. Behind the screen of his briefcase, he quickly picked up the tie through his sleeve and shoved it into the briefcase.

Before he'd had time to pull his hand out, Zhang Donglai once again unexpectedly looked at him through the rearview mirror. "Is it the subway station up ahead, Attorney Liu?"

Attorney Liu was so startled his heart nearly stopped. He completely lost his powers of speech and nodded falteringly.

Zhang Donglai raised his eyebrows. "Why is your face so sweaty? Is the air-conditioning not cold enough?"

His companion in the passenger's seat wasn't having this. "Don't turn it down anymore, I get cold."

If it hadn't been for this entirely ignorant silly girl interrupting, Attorney Liu thought he would have gone out of his mind with fear. He didn't know how he managed to get out of Zhang Donglai's car. Zhang Donglai politely stuck his head out the window: "Attorney Liu, are you really all right? I really don't need to drive you home?"

The lawyer strove to arrange his facial muscles. "There's really no need."

Luckily, Zhang Donglai's thought processes were addled by lust, and he didn't seriously want to drive this sturdy fellow home. Having received a confirmation, he quickly stepped on the gas pedal and drove off.

The night wind blew past, and Attorney Liu discovered that his spine was soaked.

CHAPTER 16 - Julien XV

Tao Ran went out and saw Fei Du, hands stuck in his pockets, waiting for him at the door.

The “woodpeckers” making an uproar at the gates had yet to disperse. With the City Bureau having just been forced to release a very suspicious-looking rich kid, even Fei Du could see the pressure hanging in the air over the Criminal Investigation Team, so he had made his preparations to wait until the day wore out. He hadn’t expected Tao Ran to be in such a hurry to get off work. He paused slightly; Tao Ran spoke first: “Fei Du, come over here. I have something to say to you.”

Fei Du blinked, then looked at the woman curled up on the chairs. “What about her?”

Hearing this, Tao Ran was at some difficulty.

“It’s fine,” said Luo Wenzhou, coming out and leaning against the door. “When she wakes up, I’ll ask her what she wants. There’s a guesthouse by the gates where our people stay when they’re traveling for business. It’s safe and cheap. If she’s willing, I’ll have them get her a room over there. If she still isn’t willing, I’ll have the officer on duty make up a simple bed for her.”

Hesitantly, Tao Ran said, “Isn’t that against regulations?”

“A word from me will take care of it.” Luo Wenzhou waved a hand. “Hurry up and go. No one frets as much as you do.”

Hearing this, Fei Du asked in surprise, “What, Tao Ran, do you have something to do tonight?”

Tao Ran didn't answer. He only said, "Come here."

Luo Wenzhou watched Tao Ran pull Fei Du aside; because they'd just gone a round, he had for the moment forgotten the game machine and its associated tender feelings.

He swept a critical gaze over Fei Du's back, feeling that every stitch of him expressed the word "flirtation"; put him in a spy drama, and you wouldn't need any makeup to turn him into the classic image of a traitor to the nation.

But however flirtatious he was, what was the use? He'd be jilted just the same.

Luo Wenzhou suddenly felt an odd twinge of schadenfreude towards his fellow sufferer; in high spirits, he hung back by the office door unwilling to leave, wishing his neck could grow long enough to observe the process of a second generation patriarch meeting with a rebuff up close.

Luo Wenzhou had known Tao Ran for many years. They had been through everything: searched for missing children together, fought diabolical evildoers together, won honor and written self-reflections together. Their relationship ran deep.

Though Tao Ran was poor and wretched, he was a nice person, nice in a quiet and obliging way. As time went on, this would almost unavoidably bring about a few inordinate ambitions in a "gender: male, interest: male" individual. But on the subject of sexual orientation, Tao Ran walked an entirely separate road from Luo Wenzhou; he was straight enough to hold up the sky. Insisting would have been cruel, so Luo Wenzhou had quickly put on the brakes, only sometimes putting in a few words brushing up against the bounds of propriety from force of habit.

Tao Ran's reaction had always been neither ashamed nor angry nor over the line; he was entirely magnanimous. And there were some beautiful thoughts whose beauty could only ferment if kept hidden away; once exposed to the clear light of day, it was very easy for them to be sterilized by the ultraviolet rays.

And now, with Tao Ran clearly displaying that he was about to move on to another stage of life, Luo Wenzhou followed along readily, releasing these non-polluting worries, which under the ultraviolet rays had been almost entirely neutralized. Aside from a small handful of regretful dust, this didn't arouse any notable waves, but rather the relief of a problem coming to its natural resolution.

Although many articles have been written by the worldly, feelingly advising the people of the world that "you must not display to others that you are doing well, because others do not necessarily want to see you doing well," Luo Wenzhou felt that there were a few people he knew, concerning whose existence he felt that "seeing him doing well will make me happy"—even if a meteoric rise gradually took that person farther and farther away from him.

Though turning the subject back to Tao Ran, in the here and now, his only remaining option for a meteoric rise was buying a lottery ticket.

Fei Du had an unusual sensitivity. Often he could tell from a single look more or less what another was going to say. This time, when Tao Ran pulled him aside, he seemed to have some premonition; he stood up straight, turned down his drifting peach blossom gaze, and actually seemed something like a decent person.

Tao Ran considered, not knowing where to begin—he had to start at the top.

He drew a line in the air with one hand and said to Fei Du, “The first time I saw you, you were only this tall, hugging your backpack, curled up in my car. When I called your dad’s number for the third time and got a busy signal again, you looked up at me…and I thought then, I have to look after this child.”

Fei Du’s eyelashes flickered lightly as he looked at Tao Ran.

His appearance today was far removed from that pitiful child hugging his backpack, curled up in a car; Tao Ran gave a dry cough. “And in the blink of an eye you’ve grown so big.”

While he was somewhat at a loss for how to go on, Fei Du suddenly spoke, calling him “ge” as he hadn’t in a long time.

Tao Ran froze, then heard Fei Du say, “I’ve troubled you too much, haven’t I?”

Tao Ran hadn’t expected him to be “sensible” to this extent, perceptive almost to the point of precognition. For a moment he stared, rather tongue-tied.

But Fei Du smiled suddenly, considered his wording, then very considerately said, “These last few days, I’ve been thinking: in a year or two you may get married, and when you have a wife and kids, I won’t be able to pester you for no good reason all the time.—My psychiatrist says, friends setting up households or moving away, the people close to you gradually getting older, people parting never to meet again, all these things aren’t mishaps, but part of the natural order, like clouds and clear skies, rain and snow, objective and eternal. There’s no hidden meaning in them, and excessively wallowing over them is like excessively lamenting the passing of the seasons; there’s no sense in it. The world is changing, people are changing, and you yourself are changing, too. Refusing alterations and separations is illogical—and what’s more, I’ve already said that

I'm not looking for any result from pursuing you. No matter what, you'll always be my ge."

With every word he'd meant to say snatched away from him, down to the last punctuation mark, Tao Ran really had nothing to add. He could only dryly say, "…You're seeing a psychiatrist?"

Fei Du raised his eyebrows. "Going once a week to see a psychiatrist is a fad for us 'bourgeoisie,' like the masses sampling bottled water from the year '82, right?"

Tao Ran was like the employees at Fei Du's company—he knew perfectly well that he was talking nonsense, but he couldn't help being talked into serenity.

"Is there suddenly someone you like, or are you going for a blind date?" asked Fei Du.

"A blind date."

The corners of Fei Du's mouth twitched, as if he had just barely kept the assessment "how very earthy" from slipping out. Then he sighed. "All right, then. How are you getting there? You're not walking, not dressed like that? Do you need to borrow my car?"

Tao Ran the Mortgage Slave, attacked twice within ten minutes, didn't know whether to laugh or cry. "That's enough of you two. You arranged your lines ahead of time, didn't you?"

At these words, Fei Du subconsciously looked up, just in time to meet Luo Wenzhou's gaze. Finally, both of their expressions became impossible to describe, and simultaneously each of them redirected his line of sight.

When Tao Ran had gone, Fei Du didn't leave after him. He waited

until he had seen Luo Wenzhou call over the civil policeman on duty and make appropriate arrangements concerning Mother He. Only then did he gently put his business card into her hand and turn to leave.

Luo Wenzhou didn't know what was wrong with him—perhaps he thought that when Fei Du turned around, he seemed to have a desolate look; or perhaps, having entered the alliance of the jilted together, an emotional link had arisen between him and this silk-clothed demon, smuggling in some sympathy. At any rate, he impulsively opened his mouth to stop Fei Du. "Hey. I guess you're eating alone tonight?"

Fei Du took a deep breath and turned around. The nearly "free from human desires and passions" appearance he had shown as he walked away was at once overwhelmed by his lively poisoned tongue: "For once in a hundred years, I'm living like you elderly empty nesters."

Faced with this display, Luo Wenzhou's hand started to itch; he would have loved to go back five seconds and slap himself—teach you to run your mouth.

But with matters as they stood, trying to back away would have been petty; so Luo Wenzhou, expressionless, said, "You placated the victim's relation today, kept her from talking a lot of nonsense to the media. That was a help to us. On behalf of the Criminal Investigation Team, I can get you something to eat here if you'll stay."

Fei Du's steps paused. He looked a little surprised.

In fact, Luo Wenzhou was only being polite. He hadn't actually expected that President Fei would really condescend to stay…just as Fei Du hadn't expected that when Luo Wenzhou had said "get you

something to eat here," he'd meant it literally—the location was the City Bureau's dining hall.

Silent for once, Fei Du stood at the dining hall's doors, smelling the maze of scents, looking at the colorfully painted ceiling, then at the glittering floor tiles; his gaze briefly surveyed the red, yellow and blue plastic chairs, and finally fell on the decorative painting on the wall.

Quoth the painting: "The food infinitely nourishing, the mince infinitely fine."

Fei Du was shaken by this boast, feeling that the City Bureau's dining hall's shamelessness was of a kind with Luo Wenzhou's.

When Luo Wenzhou didn't want to cook, he would grab something from the dining hall to take home, so now he went very familiarly towards the windows and out of politeness said to Fei Du, "Do you have any dietary restrictions?"

Fei Du, wholly impolitely, answered, "I do.—I don't eat raw scallions or cooked garlic; I don't eat ginger, raw or cooked. I don't eat sour things or spicy things. I don't eat animal fat. I don't eat the stalks of plants. I don't eat eggplants or tomatoes with their skins on. I don't eat animals from the knee down or the neck up, and I don't eat organ meat."

Luo Wenzhou: "…"

Fei Du met his gaze coolly and unflinchingly, considered carefully, then added, "I also don't eat cooked egg yolks or brined tofu—oh, I can make do with the gypsum kind."

Luo Wenzhou had never before seen a primate who was even harder to satisfy than Luo Yiguo. He felt that it took all of his

assembled forces to hold back the sentence, “Then you can get the hell out and eat shit.”

Drawing an overdraft on the rest of his life’s supply of patience, Captain Luo ordered some dishes from the stir-fry counter, explaining to the cook that this and that wasn’t wanted. Then he went to deliver feed to the pestilential “Fei Yiguo.”

The outcome was that Fei Du picked through all the things laid out on the table and finally picked up a brown sugar-filled sweet bun, then nibbled at the candied apples.

The corner of Luo Wenzhou’s eye twitched. “You didn’t say you don’t eat seafood.”

“I do eat it,” Fei Du answered without glancing up. “I just don’t want to peel it.”

Luo Wenzhou took a deep breath, once again feeling a deep sense of recognition towards Tao Ran’s saintly nature—he had resisted throttling this bit of goods for seven years.

Luo Wenzhou rapped on the table. “Did you mean what you said to Tao Ran?”

Fei Du didn’t answer. He gave him a half-mocking look, seeming to have just heard something stupid.

“What’s with the attitude? I only asked you to stay to eat because I felt sorry for you for getting jilted.” Luo Wenzhou got out a pair of single-use gloves and, pretending he was feeding a cat, shelled a plate full of braised jumbo shrimp. “Why did you stay?”

The tips of Fei Du’s chopsticks paused, and he grabbed a shrimp. As a form of equal exchange, his next sentence wasn’t an attack. “No

reason.—Have you released Zhang Donglai as a lure because you suspect the murderer is close to him and is attentively following the police's movements?"

"Do you have an opposing view?"

"My line of thinking is about the same," said Fei Du. "In fact, if you'd gone from the victim himself in the first place, it shouldn't have been hard to find this person. He's probably known the victim for a long time. He may have changed his name, but in this society where everyone has an identity card, it's impossible to change your name without leaving a trace. It's all right as long as no one suspects and goes looking, but once your system goes to investigate, he'll very soon be revealed. Therefore, he'll be desperately trying to turn your attention away."

"You think the victim knew the murderer before coming to Yan City," said Luo Wenzhou, "not that he was secretly doing business that couldn't stand the light of day for someone."

"The money to pay for his mom's medical treatment," said Fei Du, "that 100,000 yuan, was sent back when he'd been in Yan City less than a month. If I wanted to commit some crime, I wouldn't let someone I didn't know the first thing about into my circle. A criminal gang making that much money would certainly have higher requirements than the ones for testing into your bureau."

Luo Wenzhou chose to overlook his last sentence. "And if he had a mysterious hometown acquaintance who introduced him to a criminal gang? The person who made the introduction and the murderer may not be the same person."

"His mom said that He Zhongyi—that's his name, right? He Zhongyi only knew one person here, named 'Zhao Yulong,' who found him his job. He didn't mention anyone else to her. If he'd met someone

from his hometown who he knew all about, he would have mentioned it to his family."

"Even if they were committing crimes together?"

"Especially if they were committing crimes together," said Fei Du. "He'd know it wasn't safe, so he would subconsciously seek out a sense of safety, tell his family, 'I'm with so-and-so.' It's a form of over-compensation to comfort yourself.—Why are you so sure there has to be this hypothetical 'gang' involved?"

Luo Wenzhou's chopsticks stopped. He stared at the edge of his bowl, deliberating for a moment. "I can't tell you in too much detail.—Because on the night he was murdered, the victim's phone received a mysterious text message whose meaning was unclear. Because he was likely murdered in the East Palace Gate District, but his body was moved to the West Flower Market District, half an hour's drive away. And because we just happened to receive an informer's report concerning the West Flower Market District."

Fei Du frowned, at last revealing a trace of surprise.

Just then, Luo Wenzhou's phone suddenly rang. The call came from a number that wasn't in his contacts.

Luo Wenzhou picked it up. "Hello?"

On the other end there were faint noises, followed by heavy breathing.

"Who is this?" said Luo Wenzhou.

Just as he had decided it was a prank call and was about to hang up, an urgent cry came over the phone: "Help me! Help…"

The call dropped.

CHAPTER 17 - Julien XVI

The short, sharp cry for help had passed through the speaker, puncturing the dining hall's quiet. Even Fei Du, sitting across, had heard it. Luo Wenzhou called back, but the call wouldn't connect.

Though it had only been a brief sound, Luo Wenzhou had still been able to recognize it as the black cab driver Chen Zhen.

Chen Zhen had reported Wang Hongliang because of the phone call he'd overheard Chen Yuan make, as well as some seemingly unsubstantiated guesses; from start to finish he'd produced no concrete evidence.

There was no telling whether Chen Yuan hadn't left anything behind because she'd been afraid of burdening her brother, or whether, having silenced her, Wang Hongliang had gone in under the guise of "cracking down on drugs" and removed all the clues. At any rate, all Luo Wenzhou had gotten from Chen Zhen had been his sister's old photo album.

When they'd parted, Luo Wenzhou had distinctly felt the young man's dissatisfaction and had purposefully enjoined him: "Don't go blabbing about things there's no evidence for, and especially don't go looking for evidence yourself. If you remember something, give me a call any time.—Even if you endanger yourself to find some evidence, it may be of no use. We won't necessarily think it will lead to anything."

Luo Wenzhou had thought he'd covered both the emotional and the logical aspects, which should have been enough to keep that brat Chen Zhen well-behaved. But not a full day later, he'd gotten into trouble.

Luo Wenzhou at once pushed the plate of shelled shrimp towards Fei Du. “You go ahead and finish eating. When you’re done, clean up the plates yourself. I’ve got something to take care of, so I’ll be off.”

Fei Du didn’t say that this was fine or that it wasn’t. He slowly poked open a box of lemon-flavored black tea and drank a mouthful; he felt it was both sour and bitter, really not suitable for human consumption, so he tossed it aside and thoughtfully watched the hurriedly departing Luo Wenzhou on his way out.

Luo Wenzhou had Chen Zhen’s contact information, but the number that had called him just now had been totally unfamiliar. As he drove swift as the wind towards the Flower Market District, he gave Director Lu a call.

“Uncle Lu, it’s me, it’s an emergency, I don’t have time to submit a request for clearance, can you think of a way to locate two phone numbers for me?”

Despite getting a call out of nowhere after getting off work, Director Lu was unsurprised. “What numbers? Where are you?”

Luo Wenzhou rapidly told him Chen Zhen’s number and the unfamiliar number from earlier.

Director Lu jotted them down. Before hanging up, he asked, “What’s going on with you right now? Can you guarantee your safety?”

“Safety is your humble servant’s middle name.” Luo Wenzhou gave an inscrutable laugh, then turned the steering wheel and left Nanping Road, headed right into the West District.

The night had turned sultry without any warning; the summer heat was oppressive. Birds occasionally hurtled daringly through the sea

of cars, almost skimming the ground, hinting that a rainstorm was about to strike.

Friday's evening rush hour regularly lasted longer than usual, but luckily this was the last day of the traffic restriction. The city center was warming up for the weekend. The enormous outdoor Skyscreen unfolded, dazzling the eye with its scrolling LEDs. These nighttime lights relentlessly pursued all the people coming and going and crossed over the wide road to flash over Luo Wenzhou's car, ceasing hostilities only when he had thoroughly wound his way into the complicated streets of the West District.

Director Lu was both orderly and reliable; not much time had passed when a technician returned Luo Wenzhou's call—Chen Zhen's phone had been located near the West District's West Guanjing Street. The unfamiliar number's position was close by; it was registered under a real name: it belonged to a woman named Wu Xuechun.

"Wu Xuechun." Luo Wenzhou was a little taken aback. "It's registered under a real name?"

"Yes. That's the name." The technician gave him a definite reply. "Captain Luo, I'll send her identity card information to your phone in a bit."

The GPS told him he was near "West Guanjing Street." Luo Wenzhou slowed his car.—The reason why he had dared to rush over alone in the middle of the night was that he had determined that Wang Hongliang wouldn't dare to do anything to him.

A creep like Wang Hongliang habitually bullied those below him and fawned on those above him, clearly separating haughtiness and reverence, dividing people into various grades and ranks; for him, there were people like ants whom he could crush as he liked, and

people whom, however he loathed them, he'd still have to hold his nose and make up to.

Luo Wenzhou himself wasn't anything much, but luckily his dad hadn't retired yet.

If Chen Zhen had run into danger while calling for help, whoever he'd run into would definitely know of Luo Wenzhou's existence. The phone number had been recorded and would be easy to trace; Wang Hongliang ought to have understood at once that it was only a matter of time before Luo Wenzhou arrived.

According to reason, Wang Hongliang would now take the initiative to contact him and feel out his disposition, seeking a private channel for resolution.

But so far, he hadn't.

Luo Wenzhou quickly realized—whatever had happened tonight, it was likely Wang Hongliang still didn't know about it; it may have been his subordinates acting on their own.

This was very dangerous, but it was undoubtedly also an opportunity.

Luo Wenzhou's phone made a noise as it received Wu Xuechun's identity card information. He parked his car at the end of West Guanjing Street.

West Guanjing Street had an open air barbecue, a night market, and "major health services[29]" among other functions, all collected into a "pedestrian street." Being a pedestrian was the only way to get by here; because of the vendor's stalls illegally occupying the road, no motor vehicle apart from a buggy could drive in.

The air was full of the smoky smells of roasting meat. Bare-armed burly men fried river snails in iron cooking pots until they sizzled, heavily made-up special “service workers” stood at the street corners, skewer sellers did non-stop business, and the smell of the sewers wafted progressively up; not far off, some people were brazenly scooping up recycled waste cooking oil.

Luo Wenzhou’s gaze swept around. He was nearly stifled by the flood of people. He stood deliberating a moment, then went over to a black cab driver mustering point.

The black cab drivers had called quitting time long ago. They were just gathered into a group to gamble. One middle-aged man who was having luck at cards, cursing up a storm, slammed his poker hand down on the hood of a car and laughed, showing a mouthful of uneven yellow teeth. “Fuck, how’s that, good enough for you? Pay up.”

Saying so, he stretched out his hand and asked his companions for a cigarette; before his companions could provide, a hand suddenly reached over from behind him, passed over a cigarette and even lit it for him.

The handful of black cab drivers turned their heads all at once. They saw a broad-shouldered, long-legged man who was very easy on the eyes.

It was Luo Wenzhou.

“Buddies, I need to ask you about something.” Luo Wenzhou very politely produced a round of cigarettes. Then, smiling radiantly, he said, “Yesterday my car was under the restriction, so I rode with one of your brothers and accidentally dropped a contract that’d just been signed in the car. The contract is just some paper, not worth any money to anyone else, but if I can’t get it back I’ll have to kill

myself to atone.—You wouldn't be helping me for nothing. Anyone who saw him and can tell me, I'd be very grateful."

Having said so much, Luo Wenzhou wasn't at all vague. He suited action to word: not pressing on to ask his question, he first opened his wallet and gave each person a bright red banknote.
"Allow me to trouble you. If you get me the information, I definitely won't go back on my word."

He was a fair hand at deception—he gave a minutely accurate account of the car's make, model and external appearance, but was vague about the license plate, saying the first two letters and the last number, skirting past, then describing the driver's appearance with broad gestures.

The black cab drivers had their own organization and territorial partitions. With this bit of information it was easy for them to come to a conclusion after a many-voiced discussion: "Isn't it that brat Chen Zhen?"

Luo Wenzhou closed his mouth in good time, his gaze level, floating doubtfully from one to the next, displaying just the right amount of confusion.

With the promise of a pecuniary reward, the black cab drivers rapidly broke up their game and obligingly dove into the intricate system of narrow alleys. Luo Wenzhou lit himself a cigarette and had yet to finish smoking it when he got the information he wanted —someone claimed to have seen Chen Zhen's car parked by the road, then gave him the exact location as well as Chen Zhen's phone number.

The number didn't connect, of course. Luo Wenzhou quickly handed over the cash and settled up, then had the person take him to where Chen Zhen's car was parked—it was an outdoor parking lot, outside

of West Guanjing Street, the spots regularly laid out but with no one to mind it. Chen Zhen's second-hand sedan was parked on its own by the roadside. People came and went, but there was no sign of the car's owner.

The parking lot's sole security camera had been half-smashed by some juvenile delinquent; its bones were already cold.

The person who had given him the lead must have felt that the money had been too easily earned, felt apologetic, and undertook to ask around to find out where Chen Zhen had gone.

Alone, Luo Wenzhou walked a circle around Chen Zhen's car; he found the ground by the driver's side door scattered with cigarette ends. When the person standing here had stomped out the ashes, he'd left behind a frantic-looking footprint.

Luo Wenzhou stood just where the footprint was, leaned back against the car door, and looked all around.

Chen Zhen had ignored his warning and acted alone. In all likelihood he had been in a very fevered condition. Then what had he been doing standing here alone, smoking several cigarettes in a row? Had he suddenly developed some qualms about his own conduct?

Or…had he been waiting for someone?

Just then, the person who'd taken his money came trotting over and quietly told Luo Wenzhou, "I think you'd better leave a note on his car. When he sees it, he'll get in contact with you. I just spoke to that woman selling clothes over there. She saw Chen Zhen. He was acting weird. He stood here for ages, then went into the Great Fortune Building."

“The Great Fortune Building?”

“Right there!” The informer pointed just across from where Chen Zhen’s car was parked. It was a brightly lit-up entertainment center, with big signs advertising “POOL, CARDS, MASSAGE, KARAOKE” hanging by the door; a line of cars was parked in front of it.

Luo Wenzhou surreptitiously sent a text message to Director Lu: “West Flower Market District, east end of Guanjing Street, The Great Fortune Building, requesting reinforcements”; then he briefly sent off the informer and walked around the Great Fortune Building. When he understood the surroundings, he rumpled up his hair and swaggered in.

The hall was floored with stately marble; some bulbs in the large European-style lamp had burnt out, making the lamplight look rather dim. Some idle young people who may have been delinquents were patrolling the hall and smoking; when they saw someone come in, they shot over furtive appraising looks.

Luo Wenzhou acted like he’d seen none of this. He went straight towards the front desk and rapped on the tabletop. “Get me a private room, I’ve got friends coming in a bit.”

Then he snatched up the drinks menu next to him, his gaze quickly scanning the list of drinks marked up 5% from their market prices, and, seeming entirely unaware of this, ordered a heap.

The front desk attendant hadn’t expected a major customer with more money than brains to drop out of the sky. She hastily took down his order. “Sir, could you speak a little slower…”

But Luo Wenzhou suddenly shut his mouth.

The front desk attendant looked up hesitantly and saw the “guest”

looking straight at her, his gaze ambiguous yet full of meaning. Lowering his voice, he asked, “What’s the least I can pay to get some ‘service workers’ here?”

After a pause, the front desk attendant put on an “understanding” smile and lowered her voice as well. She gently took a photo album out from under the table and pushed it over. “You can look at the photos first.”

The photo album was a series of “skilled portraits,” the skills very lacking. All the faces belonged to heavily made up temptresses, giving off a strong sense of cloying sultriness.

Luo Wenzhou flipped through the whole album twice, then deliberately displayed some irritation. “These are all made up so their own mothers wouldn’t recognize them. Do you guys have some more normal ones?”

The front desk attendant was about to answer, but Luo Wenzhou leaned forward slightly. As if he was dropping an act, impatiently “revealing his true intentions,” he asked, “Do you have one called Wu Xuechun?”

CHAPTER 18 - Julien XVII

“Wu…Wu Xuechun?” The front desk attendant’s smile suddenly stiffened.

Luo Wenzhou looked at her, the feigned suggestiveness in his keen gaze developing a crack. He said heavily, “What’s wrong?”

The front desk attendant seemed to have been frozen by his gaze; she involuntarily averted her eyes, then forced herself to calm down and give Luo Wenzhou a sugary smile. “Nothing, it’s like this: our services workers here all use English names. Hearing you suddenly say her original name, I didn’t quite follow… Wu Xuechun, I think Wu Xuechun must be Linda?”

Though Luo Wenzhou was currently in the tiger’s den, hearing this, he still couldn’t resist running off at the mouth. “Your corporate culture here is pretty Westernized.”

The front desk attendant’s eyes flashed, and she pushed the picture book into Luo Wenzhou’s hands again. “Sir, Linda isn’t feeling well today. Would you like to see the others again? Or have you met her before?”

Luo Wenzhou leaned back and didn’t answer. He looked loftily down at the girl at the front desk and asked in turn, “What, you need to get a background check to order a service worker?”

The front desk attendant hurriedly apologized in a low voice, then quickly arranged a private room for him and had someone lead him there. It may have been Luo Wenzhou’s mistaken impression, but there seemed to be more eyes watching him now.

When he’d gone, the front desk attendant let out a long breath,

picked up a commercial walkie-talkie beside her and quietly said, “He’s here, like you said. In the Hibiscus City room.”

Static came over the walkie-talkie, then a male voice: “How many with him?”

“Just…just him.” The front desk attendant pursed her lips, her palms sweating, nearly unable to hold onto the big black implement. “Next time, don’t…don’t make me do this, all right? I…”

She hadn’t finished speaking when an obscenity-filled voice came faintly over the walkie-talkie: “Motherfucker! Just him. He must must think he’s pretty lucky! If I’d known, I’d have had someone lying in wait at the door with a sack to kill him, what the fuck’s the point of going to all this trouble!”

Amidst the profanity, the wireless link was cut off from the other end.

Just then, a girl wearing a white dress was shoved and prodded in by two people. There was a name tag reading “Linda” on her chest; this was Wu Xuechun.

Wu Xuechun passed the front desk, looking helplessly at the girl sitting at it; the two of them exchanged a look, then each quickly glanced away.

A few minutes after Luo Wenzhou had gone, Fei Du didn’t feel like eating anymore and walked out of the City Bureau’s dining hall; on walking out he saw that Mother He had woken up, and an officer on duty was drying out his mouth trying to talk her into going to a hotel. Mother He’s eyes were bulging, her face waxen; she clutched at her own clothing, neither speaking nor nodding.

She understood nothing of what went on outside, so she always suspected that others wanted to trick her, always felt helpless.

Living year-round in sealed-off surroundings and lacking contact with the outside world will often produce this kind of ignorant cowardice and stupidity. For this woman, who had been sick for many years, her son had been her only support, her only link to and shield from the whole bustling world.

Fei Du considered her through the glass for a while, thinking she seemed like a snail that had lost its shell.

He didn't disturb Mother He. He quickly left the City Bureau, heading for the West Flower Market District.

Hibiscus City was a private room in a corner. Luo Wenzhou felt there was something off as soon as he came in—because in here it didn't look as dim as in the other private rooms. His gaze swept around the room, finding some arcane mysteries in a corner.

While going around the Great Fortune Building earlier, Luo Wenzhou had found that, owing to a problem with the construction, there were some unsealed windows at the building's four corners—it seemed that one of them was in this room.

No one opens windows in karaoke rooms, so blackout curtains had been pasted over the wallpaper, sealing the window from inside. Perhaps too much time had passed; the places where the curtains were glued had come a little loose, some light from the street lamps leaking in through the crevices.

Luo Wenzhou looked around, seemingly indifferent, turned on the music and examined the ceiling as if looking for a smoke alarm.

Apparently having noticed nothing unusual, Luo Wenzhou got out

his cigarettes and lit one.

He held his lighter in one hand and very naturally cupped the flame with the other, using this gesture to furtively unfold a piece of paper hidden in his palm.

The second time the front desk girl had pushed the photo album towards him, using the album as cover, she'd passed him a note.

On it was a line scribbled hastily in ballpoint pen: "Someone's lying in wait for you."

Luo Wenzhou was a little surprised.

Of course he knew there was someone lying in wait for him. Chen Zhen had phoned him to call for help; the other party would certainly anticipate that he would come. Because of this, Luo Wenzhou had mentioned Wu Xuechun at the door on purpose, publicly barging right in, acting experienced but not very brilliant, showing himself fully alert but alert in an entirely muddle-headed way.

This way, the person behind the scenes would be sure of success, and wouldn't feel cornered and get desperate. He would even try to be clever, circling around Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou had planned to use himself to lure the enemy in, playing a hand of the oriole walking behind.

But he hadn't expected that the front desk receptionist, a complete stranger to him, would secretly help him.

It seemed obvious that arranging for him to be in the Hibiscus City room with its secret window was another one of the girl's maneuvers for helping him—if anything went wrong, the room had

a window, and he had a means of escape.

Luo Wenzhou pinched his chin, feeling boundlessly moved.

He thought, *Being good-looking has some benefits after all.*

Just then, the private room's door was opened from the outside. Luo Wenzhou calmly put down his lighter, crushed the note in the palm of his hand and looked up.

There was a girl wearing a white dress standing at the door. Her dyed hair looked a little faded; her makeup was unusually thick. The girl smiled at him, puckering her lips, and coquettishly said, "Hello, sir. I'm Linda."

Luo Wenzhou was speechless.

This person's nose and mouth seemed to have been flattened and then rebuilt with makeup; he really couldn't quite tell whether this was Wu Xuechun.

Some attendants followed her in, bringing the drinks he'd ordered.

Luo Wenzhou nodded at the girl. "Sit."

Linda was devoted to service; after coming into the room, she wasn't idle. While starting a conversation with Luo Wenzhou, she quickly laid out the drinks; Luo Wenzhou was just thinking of tapping out his cigarette ash, and she very alertly held up an ashtray and said, "You've ordered so many drinks, handsome. There must be a lot of guests coming? Do you need me to call some more girls?"

Her voice was sweet and simpering, but it inadvertently sounded a little nasal. Looking close, there was a layer of red over her eyes—

she seemed to have just been crying; the face-full of heavy makeup must have been to cover up her reddened nose and eyelids.

Luo Wenzhou paused, then gently held her chin, looking her over left and right. The action was lecherous, but his expression was very grave, as if he was trying to detect some resemblance to the girl on the identity card. After a while, seeming to have learned something, he was about to draw back his arm and speak, but Linda suddenly grabbed his wrist.

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes slightly.

Holding his arm, Linda put on a just convincing enough display of refusal and said in a displeased voice, “Don’t, handsome. It’s that time of the month. I can only drink with you.”

Saying so, she leaned back weakly, knocking over a bottle of alcohol on the coffee table. The bottle wobbled, about to fall; the girl’s thickly-painted face showed a flash of nervousness.

But in that instant Luo Wenzhou reached firmly around her and scooped up the bottle, not spilling a drop.

Linda froze.

Luo Wenzhou sighed silently. Of course he’d guessed there was a listening device planted in the private room; if it wasn’t under the coffee table, then it was in the base of the couch.—Now it looked like it was under the coffee table. The girl’s attempt to fake an accident and use the spilled alcohol to damage the listening device was really too obvious.

Luo Wenzhou looked at Linda and spoke with a double meaning: “A girl should be a little more careful—not so clumsy.”

Linda thought he hadn't followed her meaning; her not-so-subtle face at once revealed an anxious look. But Luo Wenzhou unhurriedly put the bottle back, then, as if chatting idly, said, "How long have you been here? Do you have a boyfriend?"

Linda looked at him blankly, the automatically answered, "Over a year. No."

Luo Wenzhou looked fixedly at her eyes. "You haven't considered it?"

Linda shook her head.

"You'll have to consider it someday." Luo Wenzhou smiled, fingers lightly tapping on the edge of the edge of the coffee table. He quietly asked, "Are there any boys you hang out with normally?"

His hands were long and slender; ordinarily, when he tapped on something, it was very attention-grabbing. Linda instinctively watched him and found his fingers weren't tapping in the same place, but going up, down, left, right…apparently forming the character "Chen!"

He knew there was a listening device in the room!

Linda's—Wu Xuechun's eyes immediately misted over; she forced back her emotions and spoke deliberately: "There…there's one, he used to be my neighbor. People were bothering me after work, and he helped me. He's always looked after me…but what's the use? I belong to this place. Inside he must hate me."

"Hate you?" said Luo Wenzhou.

Wu Xuechun hadn't said "disdain"; she'd said "hate."

In a couple of sentences she'd explained her relationship with Chen Zhen, as well as the fact that she "belonged to this place," and surely knew some of "this place"'s internal affairs, maybe even those related to Chen Yuan's death.

Luo Wenzhou paused, then quietly said, "Is this boy still 'in the area?'"

Wu Xuechun nodded at him. "I don't have the face to see him. As long as he's safe and sound, I'll be satisfied."

Luo Wenzhou relaxed a little. It seemed that Chen Zhen was only temporarily confined, and this girl was even more clever than he'd imagined.

He leaned back lightly against the couch, then asked, "What does he do?"

Wu Xuechun was accustomed to entertaining guests and in the habit of weighing words and observing expressions. Seeing his relaxed pose and hearing his words, she understood that Luo Wenzhou had gotten her hint and was now asking her what Chen Zhen's purpose in coming to the Great Fortune Building had been.

Wu Xuechun forcibly restrained her impulse to look in the direction of the security camera, organized her words, then whispered, "I don't know. He must be busy. I heard there's a 'child' in his family who left home a little while ago. He must be searching all over. He heard the 'child' had come over here once after school. She seemed to have picked up some no-good boyfriend. A few days ago he came to ask me about her."

"A young teen went missing," said Luo Wenzhou, "so how come they didn't call the police?"

“It’s no use. No one cares.” Hearing the word “police,” Wu Xuechun stiffened all over and stammered out these sentences. Then she seemed to remember something and added, “The name of a place was written in the child’s homework notebook, a place around here. He lives far away, so he asked me about it.”

Chen Zhen had come to ask about the “Golden Triangle Lot!”

The security camera and the listening device meanwhile were transmitting every bit of their back-and-forth chat to the ears of some people.

They were in a certain luxurious private room on the second floor, choked with the odor of liquor and another peculiar smell. Next to them some men and women, clearly already out of their minds, were shooting up, then writhing wildly together to get their blood flowing as fast as possible.

A circle of men sat on the couches, keeping an eye on Luo Wenzhou through the camera and their headphones. Their leader was the captain of the Flower Market District’s Criminal Investigation Team. They were comparatively clear-headed; they hadn’t touched the drugs and only had a little to drink. They were completely ignoring the Cavern of Silken Webs going on behind them.

One of them poked at the screen and said, “This Luo’s been yammering with the woman for more than ten minutes. Why hasn’t he stopped talking nonsense yet?”

The captain coldly said, “Haven’t you noticed? He’s been indirectly getting at what happened to that brat. Now he knows he’s not dead, he won’t dare to act rashly.”

“How do you know that?”

“The brat definitely didn’t tell him anything.” Captain Huang adopted a strategizing manner. “If Luo knew there was anything here, he wouldn’t have dared to come barging in so openly… Come to think of it, the woman’s a real turncoat. We’ll have to think of a way to get rid of her.”

“Captain Huang, how do we take care of Luo? Report it to Director Wang tomorrow?”

“Director Wang? Director Wang’s getting on in years. He’s gone soft. There’s no telling if tomorrow he’ll take along some cash to that brat’s house and beg him to let it go—even if this Luo is sensible and gets into our boat, afterwards we’ll have to keep paying tribute to him. It’ll never end. Better to deal with the problem once and for all.” The captain gave a somber laugh. “But we can’t take care of him here. There’s just been a big case in the West District. It’s too sensitive now. We’ll have to be a little more subdued.”

“You mean…”

“Leave the brat Luo for now, wait for the storm to pass, use that whelp as bait to lure him in.” Captain Huang licked his lips. “On the way, if he happens by coincidence to run into a criminal and have some fun first, after all, ours is a dangerous profession—first make sure the whelp will obey. Did you give him the shot?”

A person next to him quickly stood up. “I did. I’ll go have a look.”

Captain Huang looked up, disgustedly avoided the attentions of a drugged and delirious woman, slowly sipped his drink and thought, *So this is the level of the City Bureau’s ‘elite.’ Revealing himself before he’s gotten two full sentences out, and all of it on camera. It looks like every walk of life is the same; whether you can get ahead depends entirely on who your father is.*

Expression ruthless, he drank a mouthful and watched Luo Wenzhou still exchanging coded signals with the streetwalker. An unspeakable cynicism rose in his heart.

Just then, the person who'd gone out suddenly came rushing back in a panic. "C-c-captain Huang, he…he…he…"

The captain looked up impatiently and saw his subordinate, ashen-faced, looking as if he'd been struck by lighting, babble out, "Dead…dead!"

Captain Huang frowned. "You dumb fucker, can't you even speak clearly? Dead what?"

"That…that…" The subordinate pointed to the place where Chen Zhen had been confined, tongue tying itself into a dead knot.

Captain Huang came around swiftly, his scalp bristling. He shot to his feet, sent his glass smashing right into his subordinate's face, then roared, "Dead! Who told you to touch him?"

The subordinate tearfully held his face, which was streaming with liquor. "No…no one touched him, I just gave him a shot, just a little dose, just a little, Captain Huang, if you gave it to these bastards they definitely wouldn't even notice it, who'd have thought he'd die? Is he a fucking insurance scammer?"

It was possible to die of a single drug overdose, but after all how much counted as an overdose varied from person to person—there were some people who could eat a peanut or drink a mouthful of milk and die of an allergic reaction, so of course there were also people who'd die if they touched drugs at all; but those were only a few extreme cases. No one had expected that a lively, strapping young man like Chen Zhen would be so weak.

Captain Huang's mind buzzed. Suddenly, he turned and stared fiercely at Luo Wenzhou through the security camera. As if to himself, he said, "This is major now. We'll have to dispose of him."

CHAPTER 19 - Julien XVIII

After hearing these astonishing words, the circle of clear-headed people all looked at Captain Huang, eyes wide and mouths hanging open.

Captain Huang paid no attention to any of them, irritably pacing a few circles around the room with his head down.

Just then, someone quietly said, “But he’s from the City Bureau…”

These people had neglected their duties, bent the law for their private ends, harbored criminals, and collected illicit money from all of this. Of course their hands weren’t clean. But taking money and keeping your mouth shut was one thing; killing someone with your own hands was another. The people in this room for the most part hadn’t been mixed up in any concrete affairs; they’d only had to turn a blind eye, sit and wait for their hush money to come in. Meanwhile they still went to work, still collected their wages. At most they received some gray income, occasionally went out to some “recreational” social engagements. None of them thought of themselves as utterly evil.—Moreover, having been deeply influenced by Wang Hongliang’s worldview, they unanimously believed that while the deaths of a few prostitutes and delinquents didn’t amount to anything, raising their hand against a member of their own profession? Now that was going too far.

When the eyes sitting under someone’s forehead are looking directly ahead or looking up, they often think that what they see are humans.

Looking down, however, they often think that what they see are animals, beasts of burden.—Those without power or influence, drifting in the current of events and struggling for survival, the old,

the weak, the sick, the crippled, for the most part belong to this category.

Looking at animals, a human thinks they also know what it is to be comfortable and well-fed, what it is to be warm or cold, but no more than that. So it's all the same if they die. After all, the idiom only says that "human life is beyond value"; other lives don't hinder the affairs of heaven.

The death of a Chen Zhen was an accident, a mistake—but the death of a Luo Wenzhou, now that was a major event.—Everyone more or less had something of this mentality; only Captain Huang with his bear's heart and leopard's guts was unexpectedly distinguished.

"Captain Huang, that won't do, that really won't do." Another person opened his mouth. "If you ask me, all right, what's-his-name's dead, we'll take care of the body. If Luo Wenzhou can't find a trace of him dead or alive, what's he going to do?"

"What's he going to do? He knows the brat disappeared here." Captain Huang's teeth were tightly clenched, his words squeezed out from the crack between them. "Today he'll go home empty-handed, but what about tomorrow? What about the day after that? Are you planning on doing nothing but squatting here waiting for him twenty-four hours a day, idiot? Can you guarantee that everyone here will keep their mouths shut tight? Business is business. Now there's been a death, never mind him, if we tell Director Wang what happened today, even he may not be willing to protect you!"

The person spoke falteringly: "They're…our own people…"

"Our own fucking people are exactly what I'm worried about! On the night of the twentieth, why did a dead man inexplicably turn up

in ‘that place?’ You were all there, did any of you see? Even if it was just some asshole killing someone and dumping the body, what kind of coincidence made him throw the body there? It’s like…it’s like ‘marking’ us out on purpose!” Captain Huang gave a shudder at his own words and exerted himself to swallow a mouthful of saliva. “And that brat just now, popping up out of nowhere asking about ‘that place,’ which one of you’s going to tell me how he knew about it? If it hadn’t been caught on the security cameras, if I hadn’t just been there, tomorrow you’d probably have been wearing those handcuffs in your pockets! How does a kid who drive a black cab get in touch with the captain of the City Bureau’s Criminal Investigation Team, huh? Do you know? No, you don’t. You all fucking understand shit!”

Someone had turned off the music in the room. The ones who had taken drugs were all still muddle-headed, but the sober ones were dead silent.

“There must be a connection between the the ‘520’ case and what happened today. We must have a mole.” Staring at the security camera image, Captain Huang took a deep breath and spoke one word at a time: “I’d meant to trap that brat Chen, give him a taste of the good stuff, get some use out of him… Forget it, now that we’ve been pushed to this, we’ll have to get rough and ready. What do you say, are you guys up for it?”

At first no one answered.

Captain Huang sighed heavily. “Fine. You’re a useless bunch. Do whatever you like, then; go and turn yourselves in. Go on, maybe you’ll get leniency.”

Just then, the person who’d just had liquor splashed in his face opened his mouth. “I was the one who gave him the shot.”

Captain Huang turned and gave him a sidelong look.

“I…I…I’ll go!”

“You gave him the shot. And who else was there who touched the brat? When he made a break for it, who knocked him out?” Captain Huang indistinctly twitched the corners of his lips, his gaze sweeping over all of them. “Who tied him up? Who watched the door… Oh, as far as watching the door goes, I’d also like to know, since Xiao Song says he clearly only gave him a little bit, how’d he die, huh?”

They all shook their heads one after another, saying nothing.

“Anyone who thinks he’s got nothing to do with this can go,” said Captain Huang with a slight smile. “But when you’re gone, be sure to watch your…mouth.”

Everyone had a mouth, and anyone with a mouth had only to walk out the door to be a potential mole.

No one wanted to acknowledge himself as a “mole” in front of this savage.

Finally, no one answered.

“Be careful,” Captain Huang said expressionlessly. “While investigating the ‘520’ case in the West District, Captain Luo unfortunately ran into a crazed drug addict and died in the line of duty.”

Luo Wenzhou looked at his watch. It was over twenty minutes since he’d called for outside help. The thick soundproofing material couldn’t block out the music from next door, which sounded like a house being torn town. He was sitting across from a girl with a not

especially dignified job, beside a table covered with alcohol worth the best part of his month's wages.

Maybe the air-conditioning in the room was too cold; a chill wind blew over his neck, and from out of nowhere Luo Wenzhou had a rather bad feeling. He then took up the heavy ashtray on the table and weighed it in his hand. To Wu Xuechun, he said, "You're still pretty young. Isn't there something else you can do? Do you want to change jobs?"

Wu Xuechun shook her head. She didn't respond, only rolled up the long sleeves of her dress and showed him the track marks on her scrawny arms, as well as the bruises left behind by inexpert injection. She was very pale, making the bruises look even more ghastly. Old habits are hard to break.

Luo Wenzhou was silent.

On such an occasion, it seemed that to accord with social custom he should act like a big brother, give her some words of consolation and encouragement. But some circumstances are extremely cruel. Had he been in her position, Luo Wenzhou thought he wouldn't have made wiser choices. Saying those customary words would have been just as offensive as telling someone with a terminal illness to "drink more water."

Having nothing to say, he had to shut his mouth.

Just then, the "wall-smashing heavy metal" next door came to the interval between two songs and briefly broke off. Luo Wenzhou's ears, recovering the ability to hear, picked up the sound of hurried steps outside.

He had no time to consider. He reacted subconsciously, blurting out a question to Wu Xuechun: "Where's Chen Zhen?"

Wu Xuechun was stupefied by his sudden question and blurted her answer as well: “In the second-floor west storage room.”

She’d just spoken when Luo Wenzhou hauled her up and pushed her towards the window. “Run.”

Wu Xuechun backed up a few steps and twisted her ankle on her high heels. She was still a little muddled; leaning hesitantly against the wall, she said, “I…”

She’d meant to say, “I’ll be all right, I’m one of theirs, they won’t do anything to me.” But this lengthy speech hadn’t yet set out when Luo Wenzhou decisively interrupted: “I’m telling you to run. Take off your shoes and don’t waste words.”

As he finished speaking, the door of the private room was kicked open. A few colorful young men charged in, bringing with them the thick smell of alcohol and another distinctive stench. They didn’t say anything before attacking.

Luo Wenzhou hefted the expensive ashtray from the table. A reflection flashed at the corner of his eye. He reached forward to block with the ashtray, metal screeching against glass. A melon knife connected with the ashtray and slid off.

Luo Wenzhou brought the ashtray down, fiercely slamming the knife-wielder’s wrist and forcing his arm back. He brought up his knee into the knife-wielder’s underbelly.

The knife-wielder’s stomach contents nearly came up at this blow. The melon knife slipped out of his hand, and Luo Wenzhou smoothly snatched it up, seizing the person by his yellow hair and shoving him against the wall. He crouched down to duck another attacker, picked up a bottle of possibly fake Rémy Martin cognac,

and bashed the big frying pan-like bottle[30] against the attacker's head.

These attackers were all delinquents picked up from somewhere. Each one looked like a living ghost; drug users, to judge by their appearances. Luo Wenzhou was richly experienced in street brawls, he was young and robust, exercised regularly, and added an extra egg to his jianbing every day. Therefore he had the advantage in cleaning up this crowd of drug addicts.

He glanced back and saw that Wu Xuechun, heeding his roared command, had taken off her shoes and escaped out the window. Then he took a deep breath and headed towards the second floor storage room—why, after such a long spell of tranquility, had they suddenly attacked him?

He didn't have time to spare to think too much. In a few steps he'd leapt up to the second floor. An idea coming out of nowhere to seize his chest, he thought, *Has something happened to Chen Zhen?*

The little delinquents he'd knocked over banded together and came in pursuit, baring their fangs and brandishing their claws. An attendant delivering drinks was frightened into a shout and glued himself to the wall. Luo Wenzhou pushed him aside and saw the notice on the storage room: a mottled sign reading "Employees Only."

Luo Wenzhou backed up half a step, then quickly kicked the door. The rebound from the wooden door sent pain up his calf. He at once switched legs and again stamped heavily. This time his lower leg went through the door, leaving a hole.

Luo Wenzhou swiftly pushed open the door and saw a person lying unmoving inside. "Chen Zhen!"

He'd meant to go right in to have a look at him, but his legs had gone slightly numb and held him up for a moment. In that moment his brain, overheated from his fight and flight just now, slowly cooled as his breathing returned to normal. Luo Wenzhou suddenly came around—this was wrong. He'd been so direct about getting the location where Chen Zhen was being kept out of Wu Xuechun. There must have been someone watching the cameras then. So why hadn't they moved Chen Zhen?

As this thought flashed by, Luo Wenzhou backed up without even thinking. At the same time, the person lying on the floor leapt up without warning and stabbed a knife towards the side of Luo Wenzhou's neck. Luo Wenzhou had been wholly on the alert; he instantly raised his snatched melon knife to knock aside the person's wrist, grabbed the person's shoulder and shoved him towards the shelves to one side.

However, the other party was also very experienced. He drew back his shoulder to minimize the force of the blow and used the rebound of the shove to punch Luo Wenzhou under the ribs. Luo Wenzhou's breath caught, and the knife nearly slipped out of his hand. He narrowly dodged the other's grasp, grabbed him by the arm and spun him halfway around, then slammed his foot against the back of the attacker's knee.

The person shrieked and fell to his knees. By the weak light, Luo Wenzhou could at last clearly see who he was holding. He didn't know this person's name, but he'd seen him waiting upon Wang Hongliang.

Luo Wenzhou forced his head up by the hair. "Where's Chen Zhen?"

The person he'd kicked into a kneeling position was Captain Huang. He stared fixedly at Luo Wenzhou, entirely unrepentant; instead he laughed quietly. "Waiting for you up ahead."

Luo Wenzhou understood the implication. His pupils contracted. At the same time, there was a sound behind him, and Luo Wenzhou instinctively half-turned, raising his arm to protect his face. There was a loud and clear crash; a bottle of alcohol and Luo Wenzhou's left arm suffered nearly equal losses. The people waiting to take him unawares swarmed up from behind, armed with knives, bottles, cudgels and chains, all pelting towards him.

Hard pressed, Luo Wenzhou dodged left and right, wounds quickly blossoming all over him.

Before leaving, he'd actually requested a sidearm, but until his life was hanging by a thread, he didn't dare to take it out—because he wasn't at all sure that Wang Hongliang's hired thugs would be willing to behave and observe the "Five Prohibitions[31]." These people currently thought he was entirely unprepared and could be dealt with using cold steel; they also didn't want to create such a large disturbance in the middle of a crowded neighborhood, so they were willing to fight hand-to-hand with him.

On his own, it was better to fight hand-to-hand than to use guns; and moreover the Great Fortune Building was in fact close to a crowded area. The problem would get more serious if people were caught in the crossfire.

Just then, a piercing police siren suddenly sounded. The crowd of people stiffened; only Luo Wenzhou reacted at once, pushing his hand up against the nose cartilage of the person blocking his path. He then quickly dodged a knife and a foot, and leapt out into the corridor.—He knew the police siren had to be fake. The West District's roads were hard to navigate, and it hadn't been half an hour yet; the backup he'd called wouldn't have come this fast.

Worried about an ambush, Luo Wenzhou didn't take the stairs. He

burst into a corner bathroom, pulled open the window, and jumped down.

By this time, he had a gash down his back, not to mention the rest of the big and small cuts and bruises. He couldn't quite lift his left forearm; the bone may have been fractured. Two hours earlier he'd been speculating that the killer in the "520" case would take the bait of Zhong Donglai while "feeding the cat" in the dining hall, not expecting that two hours later he'd have been transported into an action film.

One's lot in life was simply as inconstant as Luo Yiguo.

Suddenly, there was a shout from behind him: "Dage, over here!"

Luo Wenzhou looked around and saw Wu Xuechun, barefoot, desperately waving her hand at him. Luo Wenzhou's scalp bristled. "Didn't I tell you to run? What are you still doing here?"

"That alarm device was me just now," said Wu Xuechun. "You don't know your way around; I'll lead you out. Did you find Chen Zhen?"

Before Luo Wenzhou could answer, the pursuing force arrived. "There he is, get him!"

Luo Wenzhou grabbed Wu Xuechun. Following her babbled directions they came to a short wall behind the Great Fortune Building. Luckily, Wu Xuechun was light as a feather. Luo Wenzhou hefted her up onto the wall, then jumped over it himself.

When he landed, the left arm he'd forced into use rudely went from a dull ache to an unbearable sharp pain. Luo Wenzhou furrowed his brow and hissed in a breath. A cool evening breeze blew, and the blood soaking through the back of his shirt chilled him to the marrow.

Under the street lamps, Wu Xuechun clearly saw his blood-stained condition and was scared out of her wits, nearly shrieking.

“Which way?” said Luo Wenzhou.

Shaking, Wu Xuechun pointed in the right direction; in the next instant, the man grabbed her and ran for it.

“It’s all right,” said Luo Wenzhou, casually consoling her. “They didn’t get my face.”

Wu Xuechun: “…”

The two of them went through several little streets; after a number of confusing turns, they actually saw the open road. Luo Wenzhou finally relaxed and said to the breathless Wu Xuechun, “For now come back with me to the bureau, then…”

His words came to an abrupt halt.

On both sides of the road, the clamoring vendor’s stalls had backed up in a flash, and the pedestrians had dodged away even more thoroughly. Several rumbling motorcycles were blocking the end of the street; they had been respectfully awaiting him for a long time.

Luo Wenzhou glanced at his watch out of the corner of his eye—given the time, his backup should just about be here.

So he hid Wu Xuechun behind him and smiled at the leading motorcyclist, saying glibly, “Buddy, I think there’s been a misunderstanding. Can we chat?”

But the leader didn’t suffer from the Villain Dies By Talking Too Much disease. His icy gaze shot out from his helmet and fixed on

Luo Wenzhou, and he quickly hit the gas, the motorcycle leaping up and heading right for them.

Luo Wenzhou had no choice; he grabbed the handgun in his pocket.

When he had yet to take the gun out, suddenly, an engine sound even more aggressive than the motorcycles's rumbles roared up.

The motorcyclists hadn't expected a brainless drag racer to appear in this place. They subconsciously panicked and dodged, immediately scattering. A sports car as colorful as a poisonous snake appeared out of thin air like a flash of lighting, executed a practiced turn, and brushed against the back wheel of the moving motorcycle, sending it and its rider flying up into the air.

Through the half-open window the side of a face, half-blocked by hair, appeared. The newcomer didn't look directly at Luo Wenzhou, only tersely said, "Get in."

CHAPTER 20 - Julien XIX

Luo Wenzhou was just as surprised as the hoodlums by Fei Du descending from the heavens, but the situation was desperate, and Captain Luo wasted no time; he promptly came to a decision, first shoving Wu Xuechun into the car, then jumping into the passenger's seat himself. He hadn't sat down properly yet when the car's open windows automatically rolled shut, and it started forward with a howl.

Luo Wenzhou was nearly forced backwards against the back of the seat. "Why do I get the sense your mood isn't very stable… Hey!"

Though Fei Du hadn't turned to look at him, the smell of blood didn't rely on a person's line of sight; it kept floating over in a steady stream.

The little sports car's acceleration was already dizzying, and next to him was a moving bag of blood to pile dizziness on top of dizziness. With the two combined, President Fei's brilliant moment went by, and, not at all brilliantly, he was heading right for an electricity pole.

The pitch of Luo Wenzhou's voice altered, and the veins stood out on the corners of Fei Du's forehead. In this extreme crisis, he carefully turned the steering wheel and drove clear.

Having survived disaster, the electricity pole unfortunately had yet to relax when it witnessed the car roll up and then down—President Fei had accidentally driven up onto the curb.

Luo Wenzhou buckled his seatbelt as quickly as possible, feeling that he'd just come out of the dragon's pool and ended up in the tiger's den—having avoided dying at the evildoer's blades, he was

going to die at the hands of this suicidal driver.

“You’re driving like a maniac!” Luo Wenzhou hollered at him.

Fei Du didn’t even dare to breathe too deeply. As soon as he did, he would smell it. “Who told you to sit in the front! I’m about to throw up!”

Luo Wenzhou: “…”

Being nauseated when faced with a handsome and elegant young man? What was the matter with him?

Cold sweat was pouring off of Fei Du. Soon he simply wouldn’t be able to see the road clearly. At last he couldn’t maintain his airy demeanor any longer and was forced by Luo Wenzhou into letting out a curse: “Blood makes me sick, cover the fuck up!”

Luo Wenzhou froze—he’d always thought Fei Du’s “blood makes me sick” was a joke, because he clearly remembered that he hadn’t had that problem when he was little.

Just then, Wu Xuechun helpfully passed forward a jacket Fei Du had thrown into the backseat. Luo Wenzhou shook it out and covered himself with it. “Tsk, and I get carsick. What… Shit, are those people crazy?”

Luo Wenzhou had meant to ask him, “What are you doing here?” But when he glanced at the rearview mirror, he found that the motorcycles were actually chasing them!

Though it wasn’t broad daylight now, they were still on a road in a lawful society. This was getting brazen.

Captain Huang and the others hadn’t expected that a whole crowd

of people wouldn't be able to stop one Luo Wenzhou in their own lair, but once you've shot your arrow, there's no getting it back. With things as they now stood, they could only carry on, whatever the consequences, frenzied to the end.

Most likely it really does only take three steps for a common person who thinks of himself as "ordinary" to go from "wisely coming to terms with reality" to "desperate criminal."

According to reason, a first-class sports car shouldn't have been surrounded and intercepted by a crew of motorcycles, but the actual road conditions always played a part. Especially in the cramped West Flower Market District, where the conditions were complicated and the roads long and full of obstacles. There were places where a rocket couldn't outrun the "Especially for picking up my grandson" mobility scooter.

Fei Du wasn't familiar with this place to start with, he hadn't had time to turn on the GPS, and it was dark; he could only rely on feeling—and there was a source of pollution next to him, making him feel he was barely functioning.

This path really was beset by perils on all sides.

Fei Du's hands and feet were cold, and even his heart rate was becoming irregular; his stomach was about to revolt, contents ready to come surging up. His hands grasping the steering wheel were white. Clenching his teeth, he said, "Tell me you didn't come alone."

Maybe because of blood loss or something, Luo Wenzhou really was a little car sick by now. So as not to upset the unsteadily performing driver, he said without any hesitation, "I didn't come alone, I have backup… Will we need to reimburse you for car repairs?"

As he spoke, Wu Xuechun shrieked. A motorcycle had quickly driven up. The rider slammed an iron chain against the window of Fei Du's car.

The window narrowly hung on without breaking, but it developed a spiderweb of cracks on the spot.

Luo Wenzhou was provoked by this sight. "This stupid car of yours is flashy but useless. If you have the money, why not get a bulletproof one?"

Fei Du gave the rearview mirror a sideways glance and turned the steering wheel, very skillfully pressing the chain-wielding rider to the side of the road. The motorcyclist didn't react fast enough, and his front wheel twisted on the curb. He made a few desperate struggles to preserve his equilibrium, but in the end still went flying along with his bike.

Holding his nose, Fei Du then said, "I'm not the President of the Republic. What bullets am I worried about?"

Of the two of them, one must have been a crow spirit. As soon as Fei Du said these words, a crack came from the car's rear window. The hair on Luo Wenzhou's neck stood up. He was the first to react. "The bastards are shooting! Young lady, get down!"

Wu Xuechun didn't need to be told again; she covered her head and curled up. At the same time, another motorcycle came up alongside them and the rider raised a hand, showing the dark and empty muzzle of a gun. Regardless of the facts, he opened fire.

Luckily there aren't so many decathlon-running bad guys in this world. This person's marksmanship looked like he was just fooling around, basically shooting blind—though if you shoot enough, there'll always be a lucky shot or two. A bullet broke through the

passenger's side window. Luo Wenzhou quickly turned and blocked Fei Du while forcing himself down. The bullet brushed his shoulder and hit the windshield.

This frightening instant made almost no impression on Fei Du's thoughts or feelings. His brain, dimmed by the smell of blood, really was about to shut down. He had no time to think, and no time to feel. Amidst infinite perils, he freed one hand; able to stand it no longer, he picked up the car's air freshener and without looking sprayed it right into Luo Wenzhou's face.

Incurring an unwarranted blast of fragrance, Luo Wenzhou was simply ready to kneel in respect for the utterly fearless President Fei's spirit.

Fei Du spotted a little street with no one in it and stepped on the gas. Spinning the steering wheel as far right as it would go, he executed a turn, not giving the gun-toting motorcyclist any room to follow.

Then, having completed his turn, he immediately stepped on the brakes—at the end of the little street, like a stake-out, three or four motorcycles were waiting for him.

The sound of thunder came from behind. They were being attacked from the front and the rear, trapped in the little street.

Fei Du swept his gaze in a circle expressionlessly. His face was so cold it was a little frightening. He took hold of the gear shift behind the steering wheel, the engine giving out a brutal roar. The car seemed to be an enraged beast, covered in wounds and entrenching itself, preparing to launch a fatal attack at any time.

Fei Du quietly said, "If I run them over one by one, would that count as excessive force in self-defense?"

The noise of the vehicle was too loud. Luo Wenzhou could only see his bloodless lips moving; he didn't hear a single word clearly. But he inexplicably understood Fei Du's expression, and his heart skipped heavily. He instinctively grabbed Fei Du's hand holding the gear shift.

The hand was very cool, hard, full of cold intensity, like some dull metal.

Just then, police sirens sounded for the second time. Red and blue flashing lights lit up a large portion of the horizon.

His backup had finally arrived.

Using all his effort, Luo Wenzhou managed to unclench Fei Du's hand from the gear shift. The sound of the engine slowly calmed. Inside the badly damaged car, everything was silent for a while.

The reinforcements were extremely reliable. They had the scene under control as soon as they arrived, quickly snatching up the Biking Party and its implements, and an ambulance very considerately came after them.

Lang Qiao was the first to run over. She leaned on the car door. Breathlessly, she said, "Chief, are you guys all right? I was so scared!"

Luo Wenzhou laughed at her and hadn't had time to speak when Fei Du staggered out of the car, walked to the side of the road without saying a word, and threw up.

Luo Wenzhou was discussing follow-up arrangements with Lang Qiao when Director Lu, who had come over in person, stuffed him into the ambulance. He thought to himself that the old man was

making a fuss over nothing; these little injuries didn't amount to anything. After he was forcibly escorted into the ambulance, he didn't ease up but kept issuing commands, holding the ambulance's door. "Chen Zhen may still be alive. I don't think they have any reason to kill him immediately. Go to the Great Fortune Building and give it a good search. Also, go to the sub-bureau at once to pick up Ma Xiaowei, we have to get him away before Wang Hongliang gets the news. Damn it, they may already have the news by now… All right, doctor, I'm coming, just let me finish…"

Comparatively speaking, his "fellow patient" was much better behaved—although not a hair on Fei Du's head had been hurt, when it was all over he threw up until he was half-dead, vomiting himself into collapsing of dehydration.

Tonight seemed to be a century long. For some people, each second felt like it was endlessly stretched out.

The Flower Market District Sub-Bureau was silent. Xiao Haiyang, who was on duty, clutched a cell phone in his hand. His partner had fallen dead asleep. Carefully avoiding being seen, Xiao Haiyang headed towards the place where Ma Xiaowei was locked up.

There was a text message on the phone: "We've been caught, notify Director Wang at once, get rid of Ma Xiaowei, ASAP!"

Ma Xiaowei was curled up and sleeping, having some unknown nightmare, twitching from time to time. His still childishly innocent face was so thin it had lost some of its original appearance and looked like a monkey's.

Xiao Haiyang ducked inside, cautiously turned his head to look back, then reached out to grab Ma Xiaowei's shoulder.

Shaken awake in the middle of the night, Ma Xiaowei was startled.

He opened his mouth and was about to call out, but Xiao Haiyang covered his mouth with one hand. The boy's eyes opened wide in terror—

When Luo Wenzhou's many injuries had been seen to at the hospital, he felt himself to be in perfect health; he could have taken on another soccer team of delinquents. He then strolled over to see Fei Du and found him with an IV drip in his arm, leaning back with his eyes closed, looking on the verge of death, as if he'd been the one to get sliced up.

Luo Wenzhou went over and lightly kicked Fei Du's foot. "Other people get sick at blood, they just fall over. How come you get sick like a pregnant woman?"

Fei Du didn't open his eyes. He only groaned. "Stay away."

"I'm all cleaned up," said Luo Wenzhou, flagrantly sitting down next to him. "It wasn't easy getting you to sit down and eat, and now you've thrown it all up."

Expressionless, Fei Du said, "I don't think there was anything worth regretting."

Luo Wenzhou thought about the crappy dining hall at his place of employment and decided that this was reasonable. He then asked, "How did you find us?"

This time, Fei Du played dead, not answering.

Luo Wenzhou kicked him again. "You weren't following me the whole time? What were you doing following me?"

Fei Du's usual reaction to this sort of low-level prodding would be to coolly give him an expression that said, "There you go making

trouble again, you stupid fucker," then glance away. But right now he really felt too bad. His stomach had turned over several times and hurt like it was being pulled out, the impossible-to-get-rid-of smell of blood still seemed to linger at the tip of his nose, opening his eyes was all it took to get dizzy, and next to him there was a "menopausal" asshole not giving him any peace. Simmering with rage, he let slip a snort.

"Then what did you go there for?" said Luo Wenzhou.

Leaning against the hospital's snow-white pillow, Fei Du frowned deeply and mobilized all the self-restraint he had ever possessed to force himself not to swear. "I went to see where He Zhongyi lived."

The place where He Zhongyi had lived really wasn't far from the street behind the Great Fortune Building, and the two roads in fact had some similarities. Luo Wenzhou waited a long time without hearing Fei Du's next words, looked at Fei Du, then suddenly saw the light. "And then you got lost, right?"

Hearing this, Fei Du said nothing, only turned his head away and pretended he'd only heard the wind by his ear.

Luo Wenzhou saw this hint of humiliated anger in wonder, feeling that Fei Du had revealed a trace of something of an ordinary mortal. The truth made him seem for the first time a little amiable.

Luo Wenzhou quickly dialed back his crassness. Taking advantage of this bit of warm and friendly "human energy", he followed up, "You went to see where He Zhongyi used to live because of that old auntie?"

Fei Du paused for a moment, then quietly said, "That place is run-down and out-of-the-way, the bad living mixed in with the good. There's a public toilet nearby, and when it's dark the whole street

stinks. The surroundings are a lot worse than the other rentals in the area. Everyone who lives there is looking for somewhere cheap: the ones weighed down by having families to feed, the ones who have both aging parents and small children to take care of, the ones who have sick family members—they go out by themselves and bear hardships, saving money to give to their families. There are also some gamblers and drug addicts, so poor they rattle, who have no choice but to live there."

"He Zhongyi didn't use drugs, according to his friends, and he didn't gamble. He scrimped and saved." Luo Wenzhou rubbed his chin. "He kept daily accounts. His ledger was very detailed, and all the income had a minus sign in front of it…"

"He was saving money to settle his debt." Fei Du opened his eyes. "And the mysterious creditor may have told him, 'I'll give you the money, but you can't mention me to others.'"

Luo Wenzhou frowned. As they'd dredged up the circumstances of He Zhongyi's life, however he looked at it, he didn't think he could have any connection to the drug trafficking network. This matter had not only not come clear, it was growing increasingly convoluted.

He pinched the skin between his brows. "Forget it. We've caught the rats, anyway. When the time comes, we'll find out during questioning whether there was a connection."

Fei Du made a faint noise of agreement and closed his eyes again, not wanting to pay him any more attention.

The two of them sat together in silence for a moment. Then Luo Wenzhou suddenly rubbed his nose. Taking advantage of the "friendly atmosphere" of recently shared trials and tribulations, he opened his mouth and asked, "There's one thing I've never

understood.—Back then, with your family's case, there was me, Tao Ran, the medical examiners, as well as the old medical examiners and old criminal policemen specially brought in to make sure our judgement wasn't mistaken… A whole crowd of people reached the same conclusion, so why am I the only one you've made life difficult for?"

Fei Du laughed mockingly.

"It's all right. Tell the truth." Feigning politeness, Luo Wenzhou added, "I won't be angry."

Fei Du heard this and spoke, indeed not being polite. He said, "Because that idiotic look of yours, like you think everyone else is blind and you have X-ray vision and can see through everything, is really annoying."

Luo Wenzhou: "…"

Having heard it, he really was pretty angry.

Just then, Luo Wenzhou's phone vibrated. He looked down, and his expression at once became very peculiar. The bit of anger he'd felt vanished without a trace.

He held back for a while, then weakly said, "So…you see…"

Fei Du looked at him in bewilderment.

"My colleague says that your car… It's very seriously damaged, and there may not be a way to repair it domestically."

"Oh?" said Fei Du. "What about it?"

Luo Wenzhou took a deep breath, threw caution and shame to the

wind, then in one breath said, “They say the cost to repair it is really too high, about the same as buying a new one, several years of our reward fund won’t cover it—would it be all right if we gave you a silk banner[32] instead?”

Fei Du: “…”

Luo Wenzhou regretted it as soon as he’d spoken. He really wanted to pick up the colleague who’d sent him the text message and shake the water out of his brain—who knew what organ he’d been using to think up such a lousy idea!

But Fei Du, after staring for a moment, suddenly laughed—and it wasn’t at all fake, but true helpless laughter.

Luo Wenzhou felt awkward and didn’t know whether to laugh or cry.

But before he could work through his “hundred feelings mixed together,” his phone rang again; this time it was Lang Qiao.

Lang Qiao’s voice was very solemn. “Captain Luo, we found Chen Zhen. He’s dead.”

Luo Wenzhou’s relaxed expression sank, and he abruptly sat up straight. “What?”

“Also, before he was arrested, one of the suspects sent a text message to have them take care of Ma Xiaowei. Our people are hurrying over there, but I don’t know whether they’ll be in time.”

In a few words, Lang Qiao had given him the two worst pieces of news. She’d just hung up when another call came through right after—it was Tao Ran, who’d taken the evening off for once.

Luo Wenzhou absently said, “Tao Ran, I have some things to take care of, can you wait a bit…”

“Captain Luo, that lawyer of Zhang Donglai’s just contacted me,” Tao Ran said quickly. “He says he found a suspicious necktie in Zhang Donglai’s car.”

CHAPTER 21 - Julien XX

“Officer Tao, just in case the test results come in and prove I was overreacting, could I ask you to keep this a secret for me?” This was Attorney Liu’s third phone call to Tao Ran, the gist as before being “I would love nothing better than to go back in time half an hour and cut off the hand that phoned you.”

Tao Ran sighed helplessly, feeling that this Attorney Liu really was a little neurotic.

Attorney Liu then jabbered, “Otherwise I’ll really have no way to carry on in this profession. What would you call this thing I’ve done? You absolutely can’t tell anyone else about this. My well-being and my family’s are in your hands.”

Tao Ran could only reassure him for the third time, all but raising his hand to heaven to swear and signing his mark. The overcautious and indecisive lawyer on the other end was finally forced to agree to bring the tie to the City Bureau at once for testing.

Having dealt with him, Tao Ran very apologetically turned his head and smiled at the young woman in the backseat. “Sorry.”

He’d been disturbed by Attorney Liu in the middle of watching a movie. The movie had just gotten to the part where the male and female main characters were having a falling out—he and the young lady had walked out amidst the crying, sniveling, and mutual accusations; it really wasn’t a very auspicious beginning for a relationship.

But the young lady hadn’t said anything about it. Even if she was inwardly cursing, she had the self-possession not to show it. She very understandingly said, “If you’re busy, there’s no need to see

me home.—Driver, please stop a moment by the subway entrance up ahead. Then you can take him where he's going."

The roots of Tao Ran's ears turned red—he was all embarrassment. "That's not…not very…"

"It's fine. We also regularly get called out to work overtime on the weekends," the young lady said. "And when *we* work overtime, it's only to make money for our boss. You're working for public safety. —And I've read about that case of the rich kid killing someone online. You have to hurry up and solve it."

Stuttering a little, Tao Ran said, "It's not, not necessarily the rich kid, we…we're still not sure of the killer."

As they spoke, the taxi had already come to the subway entrance. The driver, all smiles, stopped the car, and waited for the young lady to wave Tao Ran goodbye.

Before leaving, the young lady remembered something and turned back to say to him, "It's very nice to be able to meet an old classmate when I'm away from home, even if the way the two of us met was a little awkward."

If there had been a hole in the ground, Tao Ran definitely would have jumped in without a backward glance.

This far from home, what were the chances of ending up on a blind date with your senior middle school classmate? And then what were the chances that the senior middle school classmate would just happen to be the person you had a crush on back then?

Of course, there was nothing worth celebrating about here. Even if he'd managed to get a date with Audrey Hepburn, at this moment he'd still have to throw her aside and go work overtime.

When he had seen the girl go into the subway station, his critically obstructed intellect at last returned to its regular path. Deputy-Captain Tao shook his head to force the porridge in his head to turn back into normal brains and once more focus on the case.

Looking on from the sidelines, the taxi driver issued a conclusion: “Young man, you have hope.”

Tao Ran laughed bitterly. “Driver, turn back up ahead, go to the City Bureau.”

When it came to watching the fun, the middle-aged-to-elderly driver didn’t distinguish between big and small matters; he was very interested in both emotional disputes between men and woman and in “rich kid killing people” cases. He really wanted to corner Tao Ran and have a nice chat. At this point, Tao Ran began to regret that he’d turned down his two asshole friends’ suggestions of borrowing their cars. To make the chatterbox next to him close his mouth, he had to pretend to be nearly asleep, put on his headphones, and play a random app with sound to stop up his ears.

The audiobook on the phone flowed into his ears amidst soothing background music: *“…And what will be left for me," answered Julien, coldly, "if I despise myself?…”*

This was a very niche audiobook platform—there weren’t many best-sellers on it; for the most part, it was long-in-the-tooth masterpieces, always broadcasting hypnotic prose. And only customers who presented themselves as “reading leaders” could request items to be broadcast.

A “reading leader” had to submit a lengthy original essay analyzing the merit of the work, then be selected by the editor. Only then would the platform broadcast the chosen audiobook, and when the

reading was complete would also share the “reading leader”’s commentary.

Tao Ran didn’t listen very attentively. He only used the music playing in the background to block out the noise as he arranged his train of thoughts.

The taxi quickly drove onto a side road and was about to reach the City Bureau. Tao Ran was about to turn off the audiobook when he heard the concluding statement: “Well, having played the famous French author Stendhal’s *The Red and the Black* for you to this point, next we’ll share the commentary of the reading leader, whose ID is The Reciter.”

This ID seemed to be a sudden bolt of lightning, instantly striking Tao Ran where he was—

Friday evening ought to have been pleasant and relaxed, a whole city full of people welcoming the weekend, but everyone at the City Bureau was either working overtime or on the road hurrying back to work overtime.

After receiving Tao Ran and Lang Qiao’s phone calls, Luo Wenzhou couldn’t sit still in the hospital anymore. His ideas just happened to coincide with Fei Du’s—though President Fei didn’t have anything to do; his main issues were that the public hospital had too many people, and the conditions were poor.

The two of them were for once of one mind, but their actions diverged: Fei Du quickly called his assistant and had her bring over a car, while Luo Wenzhou shamelessly hitched a ride.

It was already nearly ten. Lang Qiao sent Luo Wenzhou a message on WeChat, reporting the latest developments. He didn’t speak for a good while.

After a long time, he finally opened his mouth and spoke without preamble: “The medical examiner’s preliminary determination is that Chen Zhen died of a single drug overdose.”

Having heard Luo Wenzhou’s unilateral “chat” at the hospital, Fei Du more or less understood the circumstances in which his dear car had been scrapped. He knew who “Chen Zhen” was.

There was no smell of blood next to him, the temperature in the car was comfortable, and Fei Du had just eaten the midnight snack brought over by his assistant. He firmly stopped the car at a crosswalk to wait for the red light, taking this time to drink a few mouthfuls of banana milk to fill in the gaps. The banana milk made him very even-tempered. He answered, “That sounds a little strange—it doesn’t seem very civilized.”

Hearing the word “civilized,” Luo Wenzhou shot him a look. “I don’t dare to have such high expectations of criminals.”

Fei Du said, “However bad a person is, he still wouldn’t be willing to take just any desperate risk. For example, those people who wanted to wipe you out and finally turned to shooting up the street—that was because they had already exposed themselves in front of you. If you got away, they were done for—they only became frenzied because they were afraid of that outcome. There’s causality there. They wouldn’t devolve for no reason. True lunatics find it very hard to stay submerged in society for long.”

On this point, great minds thought alike. Wu Xuechun had confirmed that Chen Zhen was “safe,” and if the girl hadn’t been lying, then it proved that at least as far as she had witnessed, the sub-bureau’s captain and the others hadn’t intended to kill him. Moreover, if they’d wanted to kill Chen Zhen in the first place, they never would have permitted Luo Wenzhou to talk so much nonsense

with Wu Xuechun.

But Chen Zhen had died of a drug overdose, which didn't sound like an accidental death.

"They may have been the ones to inject the drugs," Fei Du said unhurriedly. "Although it strains the understanding that people who have regular contact with drugs wouldn't manage to control the dose and slip up and kill someone. If I were suspected of harboring a drug trafficking gang, and a stranger barged in and blindly started asking sensitive questions, I certainly wouldn't kill him without careful consideration."

Hearing his tone, which sounded like he was discussing the weather, Luo Wenzhou's scalp went numb. But at the same time, he still asked, "And then what?"

"Step one, control him. Suss out just how much he knows, how deep he's gotten, and whether there's anyone behind him prompting him. Then use drugs, force, threats, and other such means to chip away at his willpower. Once I understand that the victim has only started his contact with you and isn't altogether your informer, that he doesn't dare to trust you entirely, and moreover comes from a simple background and has no close connections, then I move on to step two." Fei Du continued his banana milk-scented speech: "Step two, use a very small dose of drugs to force him to develop an addiction, and while he's in a confused state, repeatedly inculcate the idea that it was you who sold him out. Brainwash him, make him believe that you're wallowing in the same muck as these people. This way, he'll easily become filled with despair and come to believe there's no such thing as so-called 'justice,' and for someone like him, the only means of survival is learning to compromise."

Luo Wenzhou looked at him for a while, then commented, "That's

really sick."

Fei Du was unconcerned. He continued, "Step three, when he's already addicted, let him taste some benefits. Let him know we aren't so scary, that we're really humanitarians.—That will settle it, establishing two serious constraints on his mentality and physiology. Afterwards, this person will be mine to use. When you and your people come in full force to scoop him up, I only need to tell him that our two sides have just had a little conflict over splitting the profits unevenly and are in a mutual struggle right now. Carrying resentment towards you, he'll become a plant in your organization."

Perhaps it was because the atmosphere between the two of them had just eased, and perhaps it was because the scent of banana milk suffusing the inside of the car made it impossible to be serious—for the first time, on hearing this unique discourse of his, Luo Wenzhou didn't erupt. He was silent for a while, then suddenly said, "If you decide to break the law one day, we really may have a lot of trouble."

Fei Du made no comment and next heard Luo Wenzhou say, "But you're just saying that, and you're only saying it to me. You haven't put it into practice, and you haven't filled the world with Killing Without a Trace training programs, so my colleagues and I can occasionally have a little break from work and go on dates. Therefore I should thank you on behalf of the organization."

Fei Du: "…"

How come this reaction wasn't the same as usual?

Luo Wenzhou nodded to himself and very kindly said, "We should give you an extra silk banner. Is there anything else? Give us a consult."

Fei Du thereupon shut his mouth tightly and didn't utter so much as a punctuation mark all the way to Yan City's City Bureau.

At the City Bureau's gates, Luo Wenzhou had just stepped out of the car when a police car drove up and parked next to him; before it had come to a full stop, Lang Qiao ran over. "Chief, Ma Xiaowei is gone!"

"Don't shout." The wound on Luo Wenzhou's back had only just scabbed over. He was still somewhat immobilized. He used one hand to get out his cigarettes and put one in his mouth, then unhurriedly said, "It's a good thing that he's gone."

Lang Qiao's unusually large eyes widened two sizes as she stared at Luo Wenzhou. She opened her mouth and had yet to speak when her gaze suddenly went past Luo Wenzhou and fell on a place not far behind him. "Th-that's…"

Luo Wenzhou accordingly turned his head and saw that a cowering human figure had appeared across the street, sticking out his head in the direction of the City Bureau. Another person came over and led him across the street.

"Ma Xiaowei and the sub-bureau's crooked-legged Little Glasses!"

Xiao Haiyang had finally swapped out his broken glasses. The rather stiff square frames made him look a few years older. He led Ma Xiaowei across the street and in front of Luo Wenzhou. "Captain Luo."

Luo Wenzhou didn't seem at all surprised to see him. He nodded genially. "You're here? Do come in."

There wasn't a bit of weekend ambience inside the City Bureau.

Those performing the autopsy, those examining the tie, those questioning the witnesses and interrogating the prisoners—the Criminal Investigation Team and the Forensics Department were so busy they were all over the place. Mother He, put up temporarily in the duty room, couldn't avoid being alarmed by this. At the least sign of disturbance, she anxiously stuck her head out to look.

When Ma Xiaowei and the others walked in, they saw Mother He hesitating in the corridor. She saw Luo Wenzhou, then transferred her doubtful gaze onto Ma Xiaowei.

"This is He Zhongyi's mother," Luo Wenzhou said to Ma Xiaowei.

Ma Xiaowei's already listless steps paused. He looked at her in terror.

The frail woman and the haggard teenager looked at each other helplessly. After a while, perhaps because the teenager's appearance had made her think of her son, Mother He tentatively asked Ma Xiaowei, "Do…do you know my son?"

Ma Xiaowei immediately backed up half a step.

"My Zhongyi is a good boy. You know him, don't you?" Mother He took half a step forward, looking ardently at Ma Xiaowei. As she looked at him, tears began to stream down her face. She straightened her neck and took a long, thin breath. "Who killed him? Huh? Child, you can tell Auntie. Who was it that killed him?"

Ma Xiaowei's eyes reddened. Without warning sign, he knelt on the floor with a thump.

"Me, it was me!" He began to wail. "I wronged Zhongyi-ge, I wronged you… I'm sorry…"

CHAPTER 22 - Julien XXI

This was Ma Xiaowei's second time opening his mouth to accuse himself of killing someone in a Public Security Bureau. This ground-breaking teenager was wailing more powerfully than the victim's relation, nearly knocking his head against the floor. Two policemen next to him reacted, going over and pulling him up, drawing him away amidst Mother He's sorrowful cries.

Luo Wenzhou hadn't expected his casual introduction to precipitate such an event. His head swelled. He had a premonition that this would be a sleepless night. He had to quickly send his building's property manager a text message, imploring a serving of cat food for the starving and freezing Luo Yiguo.

Lang Qiao was about to lead Fei Du away to give a statement. Luo Wenzhou looked up and called him to a stop.

"Hey," said Luo Wenzhou, without appellation or inscription, "thank you."

Fei Du hadn't expected this person's dog mouth to sprout an elephant's tusk[33]. He was rather taken aback. His steps paused. With the elegance of a president giving an inaugural speech, he very solemnly nodded. "You're welcome."

Luo Wenzhou appraisingly watched his model-like back out of the room, oddly reminded of a strutting poodle. He really wanted to chase after and put a walking stick in his hand. But after fighting for seven years, the two of them had only just seen the dawning light of a ceasefire, and Luo Wenzhou didn't want to go borrowing trouble. He therefore forced down all his marvelous ideas, turned and patted Xiao Haiyang on the shoulder. "Why don't you come with me."

Xiao Haiyang silently followed him to an individual interrogation room. Somewhat nervily pushing at his glasses, he looked directly at Luo Wenzhou. “I’m not here in the capacity of a police officer assisting with an investigation, am I?”

Luo Wenzhou gestured at Xiao Haiyang. “Please sit. Tell me, what capacity do you think you’re here in?”

Xiao Haiyang didn’t stand on ceremony. At his words, he sat down, very upright. “Am I a suspect or a witness?”

Luo Wenzhou laughed and according to habit crossed his legs and leaned back. The wound on his back immediately protested, shrieking towards his pain receptors, hurting so much he nearly grimaced. Luo Wenzhou forced himself to preserve his demeanor and awkwardly sat up properly, chattily asking, “How long have you been at work?”

“Two years…a year and half,” said Xiao Haiyang.

“Oh, so you only finished your trial period recently, right?” Luo Wenzhou nodded, recalled for a moment, then continued, “When I was little, my dad originally wanted to have me test into the armed forces academy, but I was still going through my rebellious phase. Whatever he said, I did the opposite. I said, ‘I’m not going to go study missiles in the Sahara,’ then I ran back to school and submitted a bunch of forms. At the time I was very deeply impressed by Hong Kong gangster films and thought all policemen were like Tony Leung and Louis Koo, so I ended up in this line of work.”

Xiao Haiyang very seriously responded, “The Sahara isn’t in Chinese territory.”

Luo Wenzhou: "…"

This young person really knew how to talk.

Xiao Haiyang may also have noticed something off about this response. His posture became a little more tense. "Please go on."

Luo Wenzhou felt that Xiao Haiyang perhaps didn't even know how to say "relax," so he abandoned his efforts on that score and became businesslike, coming right to the point. "Anyway, you're a fellow professional who's performed meritorious work. Whether you're a witness or a suspect remains to be seen based on the outcome of the investigation.—You've already mentally prepared for that, and you've also prepared to divulge everything you know, is that right?"

Xiao Haiyang nodded.

"Good," said Luo Wenzhou. "I'll start from what's right in front of us, then. Why did you bring Ma Xiaowei here tonight?"

"Because there were people who wanted to kill him to silence him," Xiao Haiyang answered without pretending to take time to think about it. As he spoke, he fished a phone out of his pocket. It was already very properly sealed in an evidence bag. He passed it to Luo Wenzhou. "I was on duty tonight with another colleague. This is his phone. When this message came, he was asleep."

Luo Wenzhou scanned the text message through the clear bag. It matched what Lang Qiao had said. He put it aside. "Why would you read someone else's texts?"

Xiao Haiyang said, "I've been keeping watch on him."

This young man's speech was very fast, he didn't smile much, and when he spoke to people, his body language was always tense.

From time to time he made little gestures like pushing at his glasses or clenching his fist. He didn't seem like an "experienced" adult, but rather like a middle school boy at the stage of development where his limbs were uncoordinated.

Looking at him, Luo Wenzhou felt that if you split Fei Du's oiliness and gave Xiao Haiyang half, the two of them would be just about normal.

"And why were you keeping watch on him?"

Xiao Haiyang pursed his lips. "Can I start at the beginning?"

Luo Wenzhou nodded, and Xiao Haiyang took a deep breath, considered for a moment, then began as if giving a careful and detailed analysis: "Our atmosphere there isn't much like it is here at the City Bureau. When there isn't an important occasion or some major case, we normally don't see Director Wang. If he has any orders for us, they go through Captain Huang—oh, that's the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau's Criminal Investigation Team's leader. His full name is Huang Jinglian.

"Captain Huang's relationship with the deputy-captain isn't very good, but there are some colleagues in our department who are his confidants and 'protégés.' Sometimes there are things he'll just call his own people to handle, and other people won't know what they're up to. The deputy-captain has basically been undermined by him. He doesn't have any control.

"I'd always thought Captain Huang was picking out the best jobs for his favorites, which didn't bother me very much. Ever since I was little, those types of cliques haven't had anything to do with me. But then one day, one of the local police stations reported a case—they'd found a girl's body. It was just time for the night shift, and I should have been on duty. I was already prepared to set out, but a

colleague stopped me… It was the owner of that phone. He said he had something to do at home the next day and asked if we could swap shifts. It's normal for us to privately swap shifts, so I didn't think much about it and agreed. In the end Captain Huang and that colleague went out to the scene."

"Huang Jinglian was there at the time?" Luo Wenzhou paused, then followed up, "What was the name of the girl who died?"

"Chen Yuan," said Xiao Haiyang.

Luo Wenzhou narrowed his eyes faintly. "Why do you remember it so clearly? Does Chen Yuan have some special meaning for you?"

"I remember most of what I see. I can still recite the license plate number of the police car you drove to the scene at the start of the '520' case, if you need…"

"…" Luo Wenzhou didn't know whether to laugh or cry. This Little Glasses' style simply didn't fit in at all with the Flower Market District Sub-Bureau's. He quickly waved his hand. "No need to recite it, I believe you. Go on."

Xiao Haiyang paused, then returned to the original topic. "There was actually something special about the victim. There was a photo of the body sent over. When she died, she was wearing an openwork blouse and a miniskirt, her face was thickly made-up—and the blouse was on backwards. There's a type of women's blouse that has the buttons on the back. If there's no collar, at first glance it's very easy to get the front and back mixed up. You only feel that the underarms and the neck aren't in the right place when you put it on. My first thought was that it was very possible someone had dressed her after she died. If that was true, then the case could involve a homicide. I particularly mentioned this point to my colleague when we changed shifts…"

Luo Wenzhou's fingers rapped lightly on the table. He didn't interrupt. He'd obtained the materials from Chen Yuan's case and clearly remembered that there had been nothing unusual about the clothing on the body. The blouse with the buttons on the back hadn't been on backwards.

"It was several days later when I found out the results of the investigation. Captain Huang and the others had determined that it was a case of a prostitute dying of a drug overdose. I went to ask that colleague for an explanation for the backwards blouse the victim was wearing. He hedged and just said I had seen wrong." At this point, Xiao Haiyang paused for a long moment. "I didn't save the photograph. I only looked at it quickly. It isn't as though I couldn't have seen wrong.—But that afternoon, a transfer of 2,000 yuan appeared on my salary card, and the text message note said it was a 'bonus'. Our wages aren't very high, everyone has families to feed, and their lives are stressful. When we get a bonus, there's sure to be a group celebration. The whole team's atmosphere is different. But this time, no one had mentioned it. Before I got off work, Captain Huang called me over and mentioned some routine work I'd done over the last few days. He said I was earnest and responsible, and he'd asked Director Wang to specially authorize the money to encourage an 'exemplar' who'd just started work. I thought this reason was very far-fetched and didn't touch that money, because I suspected it was 'hush money.'"

As soon as he heard this, Luo Wenzhou understood that this was in fact brazen hush money. "But you didn't have evidence. The concluding report for Chen Yuan's case was very clean. There were no weak points."

Xiao Haiyang's cheeks tightened, and he nodded rather unwillingly.

Luo Wenzhou let out a breath. "And then? That day at the crime

scene, why did you hint to us that the place where we'd found the body wasn't the initial scene of the crime?"

"I thought Captain Huang and the others were up to something, so I thought it over and didn't disclose the matter of the bonus." Xiao Haiyang lifted his chin slightly, indicating the phone in the evidence bag next to Luo Wenzhou. "I looked for an opportunity to plant a virus on that colleague's phone, accessed his GPS, and kept track of his whereabouts every day."

Luo Wenzhou: "…"

Xiao Haiyang quickly explained, "I know that's against the law, but during training I barely scraped by on a lot of subjects. It wasn't realistic for me to try following them. I definitely would have been discovered at once. This was all I could do."

"No, I just didn't expect you to be so talented." Luo Wenzhou smiled. "What did you find?"

"After work he usually went to some entertainment centers. Besides that, every month on days that were multiples of five—the fifth, the tenth, the fifteenth, the twentieth, and so on—as long as he wasn't on duty, he would go to some fixed locations, including near the lot where He Zhongyi's body was found, and other fairly out-of-the-way places. I avoided him and the others and snuck over to investigate a couple of those places. I didn't turn anything up. But one time I pretend to be from out of town and asked for directions, and an old lady who lived nearby warned me not to go there after dark. She said there were sometimes 'people doing snow' there."

Luo Wenzhou said, "So what you're saying is, on the night of the twentieth, using the GPS, you determined that your colleague just happened to be at the place where He Zhongyi's body was found."

“After work, he left with Captain Huang and the others. I suspect Captain Huang and the others were also there then. The phone didn’t show him leaving until almost eleven,” said Xiao Haiyang. “Captain Luo, I think if we’d killed him ourselves, it would definitely be a bit more professional. It’s not very likely that the body would have been so blatantly left there to cause such an irreparable uproar. Afterwards, Ma Xiaowei’s appearance bore out my guesses—Captain Huang and the others had participated in certain business transactions at the scene that night, and in the process maybe there was some kind of quarrel that the neighbors overheard. Ma Xiaowei was there, too. And none of them saw how the body appeared there.”

Luo Wenzhou listened, nodded, and made no comment. He only suddenly asked, “Where were you on the night of the twentieth?”

“I was on duty at the bureau, working the night shift. There’s the duty log and the security camera footage.” Xiao Haiyang’s expression didn’t flicker; he wasn’t upset at all by Luo Wenzhou’s blunt question. He very calmly and impressively said, “You suspect that I’m the one who dumped the body? I’m not. The West District’s roads are complicated. If you want to dump a body there without anyone being the wiser, first you have to be very familiar with the surroundings, and then you have to have a means of transportation. I only recently got my driver’s license, and I don’t have a car yet.”

Luo Wenzhou’s expression was cool. It was unclear whether he believed this or not. Then he asked, “Now, have you…ever heard of the ‘Golden Triangle Lot’?”

“Ma Xiaowei says, this so-called ‘Golden Triangle Lot’ is that very bit of ground where He Zhongyi’s body was found. It’s one of the places where they normally do business. Only people who regularly participate in the transactions know that name. It’s strictly forbidden to share it.” Tao Ran hurriedly left the interrogation room

and tossed his notes onto a table. He said to Lang Qiao, “That bastard Luo Wenzhou, investigating something this big on his own without so much as a heads up. Does he think he’s Captain America?”

Lang Qiao curiously asked, “So did Ma Xiaowei really kill He Zhongyi?”

“It doesn’t seem like it to me. Ma Xiaowei says that after he got addicted, he was often strapped for cash. The people around him all knew about his problem and wouldn’t leave money lying around the apartment. Ma Xiaowei set his eyes on He Zhongyi’s new phone and snatched it for his own benefit. He was just about to go out to transact business when He Zhongyi got home from work and happened to think of the phone. He couldn’t find it and questioned him. Ma Xiaowei is like a person possessed; he firmly denied everything. Finally, the two of them parted on bad terms.—Xiao Qiao, give me a bottle of water, I haven’t had a break all evening.” Tao Ran took the bottle of water, drank half of it in one go, then took a breath. “That night Ma Xiaowei exchanged He Zhongyi’s phone for drugs and was very pleased with himself, thinking that when He Zhongyi got back and searched his things, there’d be nothing he could say. But the outcome was that He Zhongyi didn’t come back, and just happened to die in that place.”

“So Ma Xiaowei thinks that He Zhongyi somehow happened to see him selling the phone and got killed because he was trying to get his stuff back?” Lang Qiao’s big eyes turned, and she quickly caught up. “Then afterwards, because of that fight among the common people, we got some unexpected testimony, and to cover up the truth, Director Wang planted that phone to frame him? So once and for all, who killed He Zhongyi?”

Tao Ran didn’t answer; his phone was ringing. The call was from the Forensic Department’s landline. He quickly picked it up. “Hello,

how is it?”

The person on the line said something that Lang Qiao didn’t hear clearly. She saw Tao Ran’s face grow increasingly grave. Then he hung up the phone and asked her, “Has Fei Du left?”

CHAPTER 23 - Julien XXII

Luo Wenzhou was just opening the door on his way in, pondering with his head down as he went. Only when he heard Tao Ran's words did he look up in surprise. "What's wrong now?"

Tao Ran didn't have attention to spare to wrangle over the cancer of heroism with "Captain China" Luo. Frowning, he said, "The tie Attorney Liu brought over has Zhang Donglai's fingerprints on it. The preliminary determination is that it matches the strangulation marks on the victim's neck. There are some small bloodstains on it—some skin broke on He Zhongyi's neck when he was strangled. Working overtime, the DNA test results can be ready by tomorrow morning at the earliest. The medical examiners say it's very likely that this is the murder weapon."

Luo Wenzhou listened silently. Then he looked up at the clock; it was close to midnight.

"Go after him," he said. "I figure Fei Du hasn't left, and if he has, it was only just now. We can catch up."

Fei Du in fact hadn't left.

After giving his statement, he'd gone to sit with Mother He again.

Perhaps it was because there was someone with her, and perhaps because the sight of the City Bureau all lit up in the middle of the night had given Mother He a bit of hope—her mood had steadied considerably. She could even voluntarily exchange a few words with Fei Du. "Before you came, I think I saw that man from this afternoon, that…what's his name?"

She meant Attorney Liu, but she couldn't remember what he did,

stalled for a moment, found that the inside of her head was a ball of paste and simply passed over it. She asked, “Have they found new evidence?”

Mother He was sitting in a comfortable chair, but President Fei wasn’t so comfortable. He had nowhere to put his legs, and this young master wasn’t willing to ruin his image by curling up, so he could only sit twisted into an upright position to one side. His legs soon started to go numb, and he couldn’t resist tapping on them. “Could be.—What are your plans once they’ve caught the killer? Will you go back home?”

Mother He’s eyelids drooped. She didn’t answer, only glanced at his hand tapping his leg and said, “You aren’t with the police, right? It’s very late. You should hurry home.”

Aside from his numb legs, Fei Du in fact didn’t feel tired at all. For young loiterers, this was when the nightlife was just getting started; it was the time he was most alert.

Unfortunately, there were no beauties around today; his only companion was a skinny, dried-up middle-aged woman. Despite that, Fei Du’s treatment of great beauties and middle-aged women was indiscriminately good—from ten thousand flowers and grasses he had even cultivated some grades that didn’t have a trace of lewdness to them.

“It’s no problem. I’ll stay with you a while,” Fei Du told her. “My mother passed away when I was little. While she was alive, she was always taking medicine for her illness and couldn’t go out and work. My father was busy with work and rarely came home. I was attending school then; my school was far from home, and I lived with a housekeeper near the school. I only came home once a week to see her.”

Mother He looked Fei Du over somewhat bashfully. “Such a good-looking young fellow, your mother must have been crazy about you, looked forward to you coming home every day.—If a mother has no skills of her own, then the only thing she has left to look forward to every day is seeing her child.”

After he heard this, Fei Du smiled at her without turning a hair. “Yeah.”

He looked up and saw Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran coming over, both their faces looking worn from working overtime. Tao Ran waved him over from a few steps away.

Fei Du unhurriedly walked over and smiled at Tao Ran, showing his teeth. “Ge, how did the date go?”

Fei Du’s sense of propriety was comprehensive. He’d said he would change, so even his manner of address and body language changed completely; he’d said he would no longer make trouble, so he wasn’t. He’d changed completely in an instant, becoming a close but properly-behaved brother.

“Don’t mention it.” Tao Ran waved his hand expressively and looked at the staring Mother He, indicating that Fei Du should go with them to one side. “Come over here for a moment. There are some things I need you to confirm.”

“What’s the matter?” Fei Du said languidly as he walked. “Have you finally realized that there’s no future in being a policeman? I’ve always said that even the person selling youtiao in my company’s building’s dining hall gets paid more than your captain.”

Stuck full of pins at every opportunity without even having made a sound, Captain Luo was so wronged that all he could feel was hunger. He ungraciously called over the officer on duty and gave

him some money. “Go to the twenty-four hour shop and buy some youtiao.”

Mother He craned her neck, watching Fei Du as he walked away. She was sitting in a corner. Her tears had dried, and a clear film had formed over her eyes, reflecting the cold city and the cold night.

Suddenly, her phone rang. It was a piece of trash that had been knocked off the market by the many types of smart phones long ago. The only function it had was receiving phone calls.

She shivered and answered in a flurry. “Hello?”

Whispery static came over the phone, followed by a strange voice. “Did you see that lawyer? He took money to speak for those young masters, but he couldn’t stand the condemnation of his conscience and came over there in the middle of the night to make a report. Now the police know for certain who the murderer is. They must be very busy now, right? Conclusive evidence is hard to cover up.—Are you willing to trust me now?”

Mother He’s chapped lips trembled. Almost inaudibly, she said, “Who *are* you?”

“I’m the one helping you,” the strange voice said. “Outside matters are too complicated. You don’t understand anything about them. They’re only being nice to you because they’re afraid you’ll go out and blab. The murderer has connections, so they don’t dare to arrest him.”

Mother He’s eyes opened wide bit by bit.

The strange voice asked, “Are you ready?”

At the same time, Tao Ran brought Fei Du straight to his own office, fished out some close-up photographs and, cutting right to the chase, pointed at the striped silver-gray tie on them. “Have you ever seen this tie?”

Fei Du glanced at it. “It’s a popular design. Everyone has one.”

“Does Zhang Donglai have one?” said Tao Ran.

Fei Du froze, the joking smile mostly falling from his face. “What does that mean?”

Looking on, Luo Wenzhou found that this brat really was astute; too bad he didn’t put it to use in the proper places. “Exactly what you think it does.”

Fei Du hesitated, took the photographs and looked at them carefully for a while. “He does have one of this brand. If I recall correctly, it was a gift from Zhang Ting. You can see it doesn’t fit Zhang Donglai’s style, so he normally only wears it when he’s playing around at his dad’s company. One time someone else saw it and made fun of him for ages. Lao Zhang may be unreliable, but he does love Zhang Ting. He complains about it every day, but he still can’t bear to throw it away.—What’s wrong with this tie?”

“This tie was found in the crack between the seats of Zhang Donglai’s car. It has his fingerprints. We suspect it’s the murder weapon,” Tao Ran said, lowering his voice. “Help us with a few things—on the night of May 20th at Chengguang Mansion, was Zhang Donglai wearing this tie?”

“He wasn’t,” said Fei Du. “That should show up on the security camera footage?”

Tao Ran then asked, “The twentieth was a working day. Could he

have worn it during the day, then taken it off at night and put it in his car or his pocket?"

"I don't know about that." Fei Du frowned slightly, then, as if he'd thought of something, asked, "Are Zhang Donglai's fingerprints the only ones on the tie?"

Tao Ran's expression flickered slightly; that was enough for Fei Du to read the answer.

He stood in silence for a while, the smiling expression that seemed to have grown along with the corners of his eyes and the tips of his brows cooling. Then he slowly spoke. "Zhang Donglai can't be the killer. If his fingerprints are the only ones on the tie, it clearly shows that when the killer took that tie, whether he stole it or just picked it up, he was already planning to use it to implicate him."

His voice was leisurely, his tone no different from his usual one, but Tao Ran, bewildered, sensed his veiled temper.

Starting from the time Tao Ran had called him to ask for Zhang Donglai's alibi, Fei Du had displayed the indifference of an outsider. Even afterwards, when he'd twice accompanied Zhang Ting to the City Bureau, he was purely accompanying her, purely going through the motions, a mere drinking buddy through and through.

He hadn't gotten worked up trying to defend Zhang Donglai. He hadn't even asked of his own initiative what their investigation had turned up, whether Zhang Donglai had been entirely cleared of suspicion.

"I never expected you to get angry on Zhang Donglai's behalf. I thought…" Tao Ran was somewhat taken aback. He considered his wording. "I didn't think you were on such good terms with him? It looked at first like you weren't taking this so much to heart."

“I’m not angry. I just think that some people have been rather too thorough.” Fei Du tilted his head and smiled at him, seeming warm and calm, then made a slip of the tongue: “Give me some coffee-flavored sesame oil to help me focus.”

Tao Ran: “…”

The “not angry” President Fei’s expression was frank; he had entirely failed to notice he’d said anything wrong.

When Fei Du, frowning, had drained a cup of instant coffee with an expression of deepest suffering, he let out a breath and spoke. “When you released Zhang Donglai, saying that there was insufficient evidence, you actually already had evidence showing he wasn’t under suspicion. Is that right?”

Tao Ran froze.

But next to him Luo Wenzhou nodded. “Right.—The DNA on those cigarette ends you sent over really was He Zhongyi’s. We followed up on that lead and found that he’d gotten on a bus and left Chengguang Mansion to go somewhere else. He wasn’t killed at the club. Zhang Donglai was still making merry in Chengguang Mansion at the time. His alibi is fairly solid. We didn’t clarify this when we set him free because I had a feeling that the murderer was following this case closely. If we released Zhang Donglai so ambiguously, he would definitely have a next move. And sure enough, he delivered this tie to us.”

“If he’s someone who can closely follow the case and plant the murder weapon in Zhang Donglai’s car without being suspected, then the murderer must be among those of us who came to pick up Zhang Donglai when he got out of the ‘little dark room.’ Aside from Zhang Ting and Attorney Liu, all those people also just happened to

be at Chengguang Mansion that night." Fei Du stretched out his legs, half-leaning and half-sitting on Tao Ran's desk. "Among us, the one most concerned with the case, the most implicated, must be me. Am I under a lot of suspicion?"

"Not much," Luo Wenzhou answered without pausing to think. "Earlier you couldn't find north in the West District's heap of little alleys. The degree of difficulty involved in tossing a corpse there would be a little high for you."

Fei Du: "…"

Luo Wenzhou said, "That's enough, President Fei. I know you're 'both wealthy and virtuous' and can afford to eat youtiao. The silk banner's on its way. Stop throwing a tantrum and speak sensibly."

Tao Ran looked from one to the next. He was slightly appalled. He had no idea what had happened while he'd been away from his post for the time it took to have dinner.

Fei Du stared at Luo Wenzhou expressionlessly for a while; perhaps he was internally cutting him to pieces. He managed to maintain his bearing and said seriously, "Aside from me, the one who most clearly understands the circumstances of the case must be Attorney Liu. The whole affair of the tie may have been staged by him. But he never had any contact with Zhang Donglai before, and it would have been very hard for him to get ahold of Lao Zhang's tie to use as a murder weapon.—Attorney Liu reports directly to Zhang Ting, and Zhang Ting fits the above requirements better. Also, she came into close contact with the deceased He Zhongyi. You need to go investigate her alibi for that night."

He paused for a moment. "There's also a fourth person: Zhang Ting's boyfriend, Zhao Haochang. He's a fairly well-known legal advisor, specializing in mergers and acquisitions. He was the one

who recommended Attorney Liu to Zhang Ting, and he came with her today. On the night of the murder, he was at Chengguang Mansion and left after the dinner party—"

"You're sure he left after the dinner party," said Luo Wenzhou.

The corners of Fei Du's lips twitched ambiguously. "What do you think? Would you participate in the 'midnight performances' in front of your future brother-in-law?"

Luo Wenzhou: "…"

Little whelp!

Fei Du said, "Can you tell me approximately where He Zhongyi went after he left the Chengguang Mansion?"

Tao Ran looked at Luo Wenzhou, saw Luo Wenzhou nod slightly, then said, "He got off the bus at Wenchang Intersection. After that we lost track of him."

Fei Du got a leather card case out of his pocket, flipped through it, and pulled out a business card:

Rongshun Law Firm (Yan City) Office
Zhao Haochang (Partner, 2nd Level)
Address: Third Floor, Jinlong Center, 103 Wenchang Street, Anping District, Yan City

Tao Ran stood up at once. "It's him!"

But Luo Wenzhou lightly scratched his chin, having a premonition that this matter wasn't necessarily going to be as simple as it seemed.

“Don’t rush,” he said. “We don’t have enough evidence. He Zhongyi got off the bus at Wenchang Intersection, so a lawyer who works on Wenchang Street must be the murderer? There’s no logical link there.—What else is there?”

“When He Zhongyi had just arrived in Yan City, a mysterious individual gave him 100,000 yuan,” said Fei Du. “If that person was Zhao Haochang, then they obviously must have had some prior connection. Considering that He Zhongyi had left home for the first time to look for work, Zhao Haochang may have been to his hometown. Give He Zhongyi’s mom his photograph and let her take a look.”

Luo Wenzhou picked up his phone and dialed Lang Qiao. “Big Eyes, is He Zhongyi’s mother still waiting for the results? If she hasn’t gone to rest, ask her to come over to the office for a moment.”

Lang Qiao gave an affirmative.

Fifteen minutes later, Luo Wenzhou had reviewed all the leads afresh and Lang Qiao still hadn’t come with Mother He. He looked up, eyelid involuntarily twitching.

Just then, Lang Qiao ran in breathlessly. “Chief, He Zhongyi’s mother isn’t in the bureau. I don’t know where she went!”

CHAPTER 24 - Julien XXIII

“Strange. I checked all the bathrooms. No one saw when she left… Hey, chief, what’s wrong?”

“Review the security cameras. Go.” Luo Wenzhou’s thinking had yet to come clear, but he already felt a chill arising from intuition climbing up his spine. “Hurry!”

Lang Qiao stared for an instant, then turned and ran.

The security camera footage was quickly reviewed. What it showed was very clear: after Fei Du stood up and left, Mother He received a phone call. The person on the phone said something that in a few words turned her into a human stone. The duration of the phone call was about two minutes. Afterwards, Mother He stared emptily for a while. Then she stood and wavered for a moment, looking several times in the direction Fei Du had gone, but he didn’t return.

She lowered her head in disappointment, then seemed to come to a decision. She noiselessly left the City Bureau.

The security cameras extended to the City Bureau’s gates where Mother He, without the least hesitation, quickly crossed the road. She came to an intersection and turned. After that there was no trace of her.

There was no need for Luo Wenzhou to issue an order; Lang Qiao at once took people to follow Mother He’s path around the corner, where they split up to search.

“I just went to ask Xiao Haiyang,” said Tao Ran, quickly walking over. “After the sub-bureau picked her up from the train station, they immediately brought her here to us on Wang Hongliang’s

orders. She hasn't left since she came. She can't be very familiar with Yan City, but the camera at the gates shows that when she went out the main doors she didn't look left or right, just went right across the street and turned. I think there was definitely someone waiting for her there."

Luo Wenzhou said, "Review all the security cameras near the intersection, look into each car and pedestrian that went by during that period."

"What a mess. There's been the traffic restriction these last few days." Tao Ran sighed. "The restricted cars can only go out on the road between midnight and three in the morning. Many people have no choice but to drive at night for one reason or another, so the roads aren't as tranquil as normal. It would take a long time to look into all of them. It's all right if nothing happens to her, but if…"

Luo Wenzhou paced a few circles without making a sound. Suddenly, his steps paused, his memory finally catching up to him —Luo Wenzhou finally remembered where the heavy disquiet he'd just felt had come from.

"…make him believe that you're wallowing in the same muck as these people."

"He'll easily become filled with despair and come to believe there's no such thing as so-called 'justice.'"

"That will settle it, establishing two serious constraints on his mentality and physiology."

How had the person who had called Mother He managed to convince a fretful, timid woman to leave the City Bureau in the dead of night?

Did she think that person was more worthy of trust than the City Bureau's criminal policemen?

Or…did she not trust the police at all?

Had she also thought that there was no such thing as so-called "justice," lost hope, and gone to use her own methods to seek the "justice" she wanted?

He swiftly turned to look at Fei Du.

Fei Du had his head lowered, his hair hanging down and blocking his face. Against his black shirt, all his exposed skin looked unusually pale, like a vampire that had never seen the light. There was a moment when Luo Wenzhou thought, *Why does he understand these people so well?*

When he wasn't mixed up with those rich kids who thought they were a law unto themselves, when he was alone—what did he think about?

Just then, Fei Du suddenly opened his mouth. As if speaking to himself, he said, "And I didn't hear it."

"What?" said Luo Wenzhou.

"I asked her, 'What are your plans once they've caught the killer?' She didn't answer, only told me to go home—"

She'd also said: *"If a mother has no skills of her own, then the only thing she has left to look forward to every day is seeing her child."*

This woman hardly had any ability to work. She was a useless person, crushed by disease. Wasn't her son the only part of her

whole life that she could look forward to?

Now that her son was gone, what did she have left to do?—What else could she do?

Fei Du lightly pinched the skin between his brows together as if in self-mockery. When he turned his head, the corners of his lips quickly twitched upwards in a bitter false smile. Almost inaudibly, he spoke to himself again. “And I…I didn’t even hear what she meant.”

Tao Ran acutely picked up that there was something off about him and quickly asked, “Are you all right?”

“I’m fine.” Fei Du looked at him and, as if nothing was the matter, asked in turn, “Why do you ask?”

Tao Ran said, “While a case is going on, our lines of sight are usually concentrated on the deceased and the suspects. It’s really normal to overlook the victim’s relatives, especially when it gets busy. It’s natural. The crucial thing now is to find where she is.”

Fei Du nodded composedly. “Yes, that’s right.”

“Does she still think that Zhang Donglai is the killer? That we only released him because we’re abusing our power to protect the Director-General’s nephew?” Tao Ran asked. “Would she have gone to find Zhang Donglai? Do we need to call him?”

“You can call Zhang Donglai to remind him to be careful, but I think she wouldn’t have.” Luo Wenzhou pressed one hand against his temple and in doing so touched a bruise at the corner of his forehead. He sucked in a sharp breath. “What’s the use of her going to find Zhang Donglai? Kill him to make him pay with his life? Given Zhang Donglai’s physique, if he stood still and let her stab

him, there's no guarantee that she'd have the strength to do it. The greatest likelihood is that they'd call the police, and we'd bring her right back here. It's a useless effort. Think about it from the murderer's point of view. He can't be staying up late just to take He Zhongyi's mother out for a stroll."

Just then, Fei Du, who had been uncommunicative all this time, picked up a gel pen.

"If the person who took her is the murderer," said Fei Du, quickly writing the date "5/20" on a piece of paper, "then first of all, when the murderer killed He Zhongyi, was it on the spur of the moment, or was it premeditated?"

Having said this, without waiting for the others to answer, he answered himself. "I incline towards thinking it was 'on the spur of the moment'—because on the night he was killed, He Zhongyi asked around about Chengguang Mansion's precise location."

Luo Wenzhou asked, "How do you know?"

"I saw He Zhongyi at the café where he was delivering goods and happened to hear. I'm sorry, I didn't hide it on purpose. I just thought it was a detail that could be overlooked."

Luo Wenzhou didn't follow this up. He nodded. "That makes sense. If the murderer had already wanted to kill He Zhongyi that night, he wouldn't have been vague about the address."

Tao Ran didn't know why the two of them were going back and forth like this. He was a little bewildered and was just about to speak when Luo Wenzhou waved a hand at him. "Let's perform a simple analysis of the suspect.

"The security camera footage shows that He Zhongyi received a

phone call, then left Chengguang Mansion, heading for Wenchang Street. It looks like someone arranged to meet him. At that time, the murderer must have already known that he was outside the mansion. What would they have said on the phone?"

Fei Du slightly closed his eyes, lightly tapping the desk with the shaft of the pen. "No one saw me, I wasn't caught on the security cameras, I just want to talk to you—"

"For some reason, the murderer decided to kill He Zhongyi," said Luo Wenzhou. "According to our inferences just now, since it was on the spur of the moment, it isn't very likely that he had the murder weapon ready—most likely, that fool Zhang Donglai took off his tie and tossed it somewhere, and the murderer happened to see it. He had a flash of brilliance and thought of a very clever plan. Now, the second question is, why did he arrange to meet the victim there—at Wenchang Street?"

Tao Ran thought about it. "If the murderer is Zhao Haochang, Wenchang Street is where he works. It's easier to operate in familiar surroundings."

"Wenchang Street isn't the only place he's familiar with. If it was only to get a sense of security, wouldn't somewhere near his home be better?" Luo Wenzhou slowly crossed his arms and met Fei Du's eyes. He found that the expression in them was very cold, so cold it was as if they were made of inorganic matter. He didn't avert his gaze; looking straight at Fei Du, he asked, "What's your view?"

"I've dug a hole and put a scapegoat into it. Now, of course, I need to exclude myself—" Fei Du said, "It's for his alibi."

Tao Ran after all wasn't Captain China, who became more vigorous the more he got sliced up, and he wasn't a nocturnal youth. Now that it was the latter half of the night, he was physically very

weary. His head, having had a big pile of information stuffed into it, had been mixed up into a pot of porridge. “Slow down, slow down. How does the alibi work? We clearly saw He Zhongyi go to Wenchang Street…”

Luo Wenzhou lit a cigarette, turned his back and sucked in two mouthfuls, then stretched out his arm to let the smoke float out the door as much as possible. In a slightly muffled voice, he said, “Tao Ran, did you forget that us finding that security camera footage was ‘an accident?’”

Tao Ran gave a start.

That was right—that night, He Zhongyi had carefully avoided the security cameras, but he had underestimated how much rich people feared death. Aside from the obvious security cameras, the paths outside of Chengguang Mansion also had some hidden cameras.

The one that had captured him was among these, a camera in a treetop camouflaged to look like a bird’s nest.

Neither he nor the murderer had known about the eternally recorded scene, and the police had only made it to the bus stop by following this accidental camera’s lead, then traced the direction He Zhongyi had gone in.

The East Flower Market District had too many security cameras of all kinds: public ones, transportation ones, business ones, private ones… There was no exception: if you didn’t already know when a person had gone by a certain street, it was unrealistic to review them one by one.

“He could have chosen a companion and found some excuse, for example that he’d ‘had a bit to drink,’ gotten a ride with that person back to his office. Then he’d have found some work and called one

or more underlings to work overtime—that's normal in a law firm, no one would think there was anything wrong. As a second-level partner, he'd have his own office. While the others were busy, he could slip away and use his scapegoat's tie to kill He Zhongyi, hide the body, then come back to the office, acting like he'd just gone to the bathroom." Fei Du drew a complete circle on the piece of paper. "Like this, he'd have complete proof. 'I went back to the office with so-and-so, then I was at the office working the whole time.' If you hadn't happened to trace He Zhongyi, then the murderer's alibi would have been virtually unassailable."

"He Zhongyi's body turned up in the West Flower Market District, and the primary suspect Zhang Donglai was in the East Flower Market District that day." Luo Wenzhou quickly understood his implication. "The murderer has tossed out his trump card of the tie. In order to make sure his alibi is 'unassailable,' his next step ought to be to eliminate He Zhongyi's mother, who could expose his identity. At the same time, he'll continue to reinforce our idea that the murder occurred in the Flower Market District—therefore, it's likely that the murderer would take He Zhongyi's mother to the Flower Market District!"

Tao Ran was already contacting the policemen out searching for Mother He. "All sections take note, the search will focus on the Flower Market District—Fei Du, the West District or the East District?"

Fei Du was silent a moment. "East District."

Luo Wenzhou looked up. "Why?"

"The visual impact will be stronger. It'll be better able to compel you to arrest Zhang Donglai again. Also…" Fei Du said quietly. "I have an intuition."

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran stood up at the same time.

Fei Du calmly raised his eyes. “Can I come with you?”

Luo Wenzhou hesitated for a moment. “Come on.”

CHAPTER 25 - Julien XXIV

Wang Xiujuan, female, Han ethnicity, forty-eight years old; educational record: elementary school drop-out; the mother of He Zhongyi, the victim in the “520” case.

Her husband had died in an accident ten years earlier, and she herself had then suffered serious illness. She basically had no ability to work, ordinarily relying on a little hand basket-weaving and the negligible rent from 2 mu[34] of arable land to survive. Before coming to Yan City, the furthest she had gone had been to the hospital in the provincial capital.

The first time in her life that she came to Yan City, it was because she had been parted from her only child forever.

Apart from this, in everything that concerned her, there was basically nothing special worth mentioning.

As far as her tangible and intangible happiness, her anger, grief, and joy, whether there were any expectations or desires in her unremarkable life—it wasn’t to be thought of.

“Continue investigating any suspicious cars that passed near the City Bureau.—Have you located her phone?”

“Captain Luo, her phone was in a garbage can not far from the City Bureau’s gates.”

Luo Wenzhou picked up the walkie-talkie, opened his mouth, then put the walkie-talkie back down; he had nothing to say—fair enough; as far as she was concerned, in all of this enormous city, aside from the mysterious individual who had kidnapped her, the only people who would call her number were swindlers and

telemarketers.

Luo Wenzhou somewhat irritably stepped on the gas. “Why? What’s the murderer’s motive? Can the sudden impulse to murder have such long aftereffects? To tell you the truth, I’m starting to doubt your inferences—also, if the murderer is this Zhao Haochang, why would he dump the body in the West District? If he wanted to frame Zhang Donglai, wouldn’t leaving the body directly at Chengguang Mansion’s door be better?”

The person next to him didn’t respond. Luo Wenzhou glanced out of the corner of his eye and saw that Fei Du was lost in thought. His unblinking gaze was fixed on the road through the windshield. Aside from his fingers tapping a 4/4 beat on his knee, he hadn’t moved in a long time.

Luo Wenzhou rudely tapped him on the head. “Hey, I’m talking to you!”

Fei Du: “…”

President Fei had reached his present age without anyone having dared to touch his precious head—and touching it was one thing; there was also the “slapping” method of touching.

For a time he seemed not quite to know how he should react. He turned his head to stare at this extremely audacious human, his expression a little scary.

Luo Yiguo stared at him every day conspiring at his murder, so Luo Wenzhou didn’t care about this “death ray.” Not wavering from his intent, he continued to ask, “Is there a possibility that the person who dumped the body in the West District and the murderer who killed He Zhongyi aren’t the same person at all?”

The tips of Fei Du's eyebrows moved slightly; just when Luo Wenzhou thought he was sinking into another round of thought, he answered, treasuring words like gold: "Yes."

"Which is the greater possibility?" said Luo Wenzhou.

"It depends on whether there are any other clues." Fei Du's backwards biological clock seemed to have returned to the right path—as if he was finally somewhat weary, he lowered his head and forcefully pinched the bridge of his nose. "Looking only at the facts I know, I could be convinced of either possibility."

"If the person who dumped the body and the murderer aren't the same person, the possibilities are too numerous," said Luo Wenzhou. "Let's not discuss that for now. If the person who dumped the body *is* the murderer, then what's the logic of dumping the body in the West District?"

Fei Du opened his eyes. His already generously-sized eyelids pulled into two thick layers, pressing heavily on the rims of his eyes.

He considered, then mildly said, "Based on previous inferences, the murderer must have been acquainted with He Zhongyi. When the police work a case, you'll ordinarily start by investigating the victim's social relationships. Therefore, he was very likely at risk. Especially at risk of having some things that he'd very carefully hidden unearthed in the process.—Why the West District? Think about it from the other direction. If it hadn't been those selfie-taking maniacs who found the body, then…it's possible it wouldn't have been found."

Perhaps he would have ended up like Chen Yuan. Even though his body was left out in public, in the end it would all have come to nothing.

Fei Du paused, then continued, “And in case something unexpected happened, the first firewall failed and the body was discovered, the police force would begin investigating the case according to conventional lines of thought. So he set up a second firewall—Zhang Donglai. Zhang Donglai had recently had a clash with the victim and belonged to the ‘shallow social relationships’ category; a rough search would turn him up. And once the police had someone seriously under suspicion, you would concentrate the bulk of the investigation on him, and would cease or slow down probing into the victim’s other social relationships. Owing to Zhang Donglai’s special position, whether you investigated him or protected him, it would all blow up in your faces if you messed it up. Wrangling that would be enough to keep you busy. Where would you find the time to explore who else a kid from the countryside knew?”

Luo Wenzhou was silent—their investigation really had followed this line of thought.

Fei Du shifted as if he’d become uncomfortable from sitting too long, absently looking out the car window at the scenery rapidly falling back outside. The rows of street lamps turned the spiraling overpasses into an elegant, winding panorama. The first inklings of the East Flower Market District’s nightless sky of fiery trees and silver flowers were already appearing far off. Perhaps it was his mistaken impression, but it seemed that tonight, the huge LED screen of the East District’s Skyscreen corridor was even brighter than usual.

Luo Wenzhou looked at him and suddenly asked, “Are you all right?”

Fei Du expressionlessly asked in turn, “What could be wrong with me?”

Luo Wenzhou thought about it, then bluntly pointed out, “Then

how come you're suddenly being so kindly and gentle to me?"

For a moment Fei Du was speechless. "I'm sorry, Captain Luo. I didn't know you liked it rough."

Then both of them turned silent, feeling that there had been something a little off about these words.

Fei Du thought, *Don't I have anything better to do?*

Luo Wenzhou meanwhile reacted half a beat late. The little whelp was flirting with him!

And he was doing it in the tone of taking a dig!

"Accounting for the mental state of the officers working the case, kidnapping someone from the City Bureau—if we don't consider the possibility that this is the work of a gang, then I think this person must have a record." Fei Du turned his head, raptly staring at the East Flower Market District drawing ever nearer, wrenching the subject away in feigned amnesia.

"What kind of record?"

"The kind that was never discovered—only having a crime buried in the ground could foster this kind of insane narcissistic pride."

A string of police cars drove into the commercial center and quickly dispersed, focusing their search on the area around Chengguang Mansion, the central square, and the places where He Zhongyi had delivered goods.

"What the hell." Lang Qiao's voice came over the walkie-talkie through heavy interference. "Is President Fei there? Listen, do you guys normally have so many night owls walking around in the dead

of night over here?"

Fei Du was also bewildered. Aside from the bar and private club crowd, at this hour, everyone else would normally have stopped. Even on the weekend there was rarely such a commotion.

"Wenzhou." Tao Ran came on. "The guys reviewing the security camera footage found a suspicious car. It had a logo on it that looked like it came from a certain rather irregular private car rental company. They've just found the person in charge of the company. Their operations are very irregular, they didn't notice that the recorded identity didn't match the person—"

"And whose is the recorded identity?"

"He Zhongyi's." Tao Ran sighed. "About fifteen minutes ago, the rental car drove into the commercial center… Hey—"

Without any warning, a round of applause burst out all around, abruptly cutting off Tao Ran's words.

Luo Wenzhou stopped the car at the side of the road and got out to look. He saw the flowing lights and colors on the Skyscreen condense, then explode into an enormous countdown display: five minutes.

The Skyscreen itself was an enormous LED screen, half of it on the buildings next to it. It was like a blanket flowing down. It formed a corridor about three floors off the ground and parallel to it. There were images on both sides—whether you were in the central square or in the surrounding buildings, you would be able to see the scrolling images.

Someone explained over the walkie-talkie: "Chief, apparently the closing ceremony rehearsal is going on over at the conference hall

tonight. The observation deck at the Economic and Trade Building is a first-rate lookout point; all the LED screens here are going to play a live broadcast."

"Whatever," said Luo Wenzhou. "How is the investigation going in the areas we're focusing on?"

"There's nothing around Chengguang Mansion. We've asked several security guards who all say they haven't seen her. We can't get the security camera footage. They're saying it's private property, so if we want to get the footage we'll need to have a warrant."

"There are too many people in the square. We're asking one by one."

"The coffee shops are all closed, and there's no one around—we'll go follow his usual delivery route."

"Captain Luo, we haven't located that car yet. We're expanding the scope of our search."

The sound of everyone reporting at once poured into Luo Wenzhou's ears. He quickly arranged them in order of priority and was about to issue orders when he saw Fei Du suddenly get out of the car, gazing at the countdown on the Skyscreen above his head with a frightening expression—it was already at four minutes and forty seconds.

Luo Wenzhou stared. "What's wrong?"

"In order for a method of suicide to attract notice, it has to make a big stir. Ordinarily it's at some symbolic location or somewhere crowded." Fei Du's eyes slowly opened wide. "Under everyone's gaze, how could you make it so everyone can see, but no one has time to stop it?"

Luo Wenzhou looked up at once. The East District's high-rises stood like trees in a forest, like fish scales and comb teeth, pointing at the sky. Looking up at them from below was almost dizzying. The countdown had fireworks expanding and contracting in the background, the constantly shifting rich colors setting off the brief time on the display.

"There are seven or eight skyscrapers here and countless other buildings…" Luo Wenzhou grabbed Fei Du's shoulder. "Which building's rooftop will she be on?"

Fei Du's face looked as though it had been smeared with white paint.

Luo Wenzhou realized at once that he'd asked a ridiculous question —Fei Du wasn't an immortal.

He grabbed his walkie-talkie, running in long-legged strides towards the nearest trade building. "All groups take note, immediately start searching all the rooftops!"

Fei Du had an intense feeling that when the countdown ended, something terrible would happen.

For a moment, he stood blankly where he was.

Luo Wenzhou hadn't even stopped to close the car door; he was already gone. But what could they find in less than five minutes?

For a time, the woman's face, teary-eyed and smiling, flashed before his eyes, blurring and gradually expanding, dangerously linking up with distant times, spreading as far as that summer day in the extravagant but solitary big house—

Just then, the sharp sound of a car braking scraped over his mind; the criminal policemen who had turned up nothing searching around Chengguang Mansion had arrived. Tao Ran got out, leading a big group of people. Tao Ran was quickly saying something into his walkie-talkie as he directed everyone to split up.

The countdown was at exactly four minutes, then three minutes and fifty-nine seconds—

Fei Du suddenly picked up his phone and quickly dialed a number. “It’s me. Is the Skyscreen corridor owned by the Economic and Trade Center? Get me their President Li, quick!”

The street full of bars was all lit up, bright as day. A number of merry-making guests heard the commotion of the light show and one by one went over to the central square carrying colorful cocktails, cheerfully shouting out along with the countdown. Under the glorious lights, the harried policemen travelled back and forth among the buildings—there was no time to wait for the elevators. They had to run up the emergency stairs, arrive breathless at the rooftop, hold up a flashlight to search. Finding nothing, they turned back and went to search the next one…

The woman stood on high. Had the person who had brought her there already left, or was he somewhere watching her?

She thought that this person had been a little familiar, but she hadn’t strained herself to find out who he could be. On the contrary, the trace of familiar feeling had placated her.

Though it was already summer, in the dead of night the wind on the rooftop was still cold. She looked down. From her high vantage point, the unceasingly flashing LED screens and laser lights of the commercial center were dizzying.

“How much electricity does this take?” she thought irrelevantly.

At home, in order to save electricity, she would sit out in the yard in the evening, wash up by feel and by the light of the moon. She wouldn’t turn on the lights if she didn’t have to. She had never seen such an extravagant night scene with her own eyes.

The woman once again looked at the countdown on the big screen: one minute and five seconds, one minute and four seconds…

She bent over with some effort, picking up a big sign from the ground. Her “grievance” was written on the outside of the sign; on the inside were two sturdy straps, so she could wear the sign like a pair of wings on her back.

She didn’t know whether the sign would break if she jumped from such a high place, so there was also a testament hidden in her pocket—that person had printed it for her. She could only approximately read what was written on it, having forgotten most of the reading and writing she’d learned in elementary school.

The minute position on the countdown had already become a zero, and the second count was quickly decreasing.

The woman clenched her teeth. Wearing her “wings” telling of deep injustice, she stepped over the railing—

CHAPTER 26 - Julien XXV

With forty-five seconds remaining on the countdown, the whole Skyscreen suddenly froze. Then, under everyone's blank gazes, a photograph of a young man spread over it.

He was eighteen or nineteen, very ordinary-looking, a little dark, his posture facing the camera very cautious, but he was still smiling widely, showing all his white teeth.

The gaze of the woman on the rooftop encountered this beaming photograph without warning. She went still; she was straddling the railing with one foot in and one foot out, the "wings" on her back fluttering in the night wind.

What the woman saw, all the people gathered in the central square to wait for the closing ceremony rehearsal also saw. Luo Wenzhou had just finished searching a building and was exiting. He lifted his head and saw the transformation outside. He staggered and nearly rolled down the steps at the entrance.

A criminal policeman next to him meanwhile sucked in a breath. "Captain Luo, the broadcasting rights must have been bought up. Can they suddenly change it like this? It's…it's another smashed-up car!"

"Shut up!" Luo Wenzhou's steps didn't stop. He lifted his walkie-talkie. "Group 1, respond. Have you found the car? Take note of all intersections. If the car's driver makes an appearance, seize him at once. Give Fei Du the car's make, model, and license plate number, have him throw it up on the screen, encourage people to call in."

At the same time, in the Trade Center Building's control room, a crowd of workers were so busy their feet didn't touch the ground.

“Is the recorder connected?”

“Where’s the video processor?”

“Lights, lights, lights… Hey, look out for that wire!”

In the midst of this noise, Fei Du was resisting the impulse to pace, forcing himself to stand unmoving in a corner.

His leather shoe, which had at some point picked up a smudge, was tapping lightly on the floor. It seemed that the whole world contained an unhurried melody in 4/4 tempo that he could use any time to separate himself from all the surrounding sounds.

Suddenly, the lights came on in front of him. Fei Du looked up.

“President Fei, the equipment’s ready!”

The woman on the rooftop stared greedily at the boy in the photograph for a long time.

To tell the truth, it was a strange thing. His face was clearly ordinary; no one would look twice at him in the street; but in her eyes, he was unspeakably adorable.

His clumsy square chin was adorable, his very wide-set eyes were adorable, his sparse brows were adorable, even his two front teeth with a slight gap between them were adorable. She could have looked at him for ten thousand years without seeing enough.

Unfortunately, she couldn’t.

As soon as this thought arose, her memories surged up like a tide, slow but inexorable, the gleam in her eyes like an obstinate reef

being gradually submerged.

She raised her head, wiped her eyes, and remembered—Zhongyi was gone.

She clenched her teeth, preparing to step over with her other leg, hoping that they could reunite over there.

Just then, the picture on the Skyscreen dissolved and a video was inserted.

The hastily put up background was a stark white wall; a few lights shone on it from different angles, so bright they hurt the eyes. A young man wearing a black shirt appeared in the center of the screen. Likely because the equipment had been set up so quickly, it seemed that the aspect ratio wasn't quite right; he was a little unnaturally stretched out.

This was the young man she'd wanted to say goodbye to, but hadn't been able to wait for.

The person on the Skyscreen gently touched the microphone and spoke. "Hello, auntie. I haven't heard any news of you. For me, that's the best news. I want to try using this method to say a few words to you. If you can hear me, please grant me two minutes of your time and listen to what I have to say."

Wang Xiujuan looked in some terror at the screen on which a person had just appeared. She was so bewildered her thoughts vanished. She could only subconsciously nod once. Then she remembered that they couldn't see each other.

Luo Wenzhou was just crossing the central square, with his left ear listening to all the groups' progress reports through his earbud, with his right ear paying attention to his surroundings. His attention

divided, he commanded, “Find some people to maintain order in the central square. If there aren’t enough people, ask the security guards to help. Don’t let the people around here call out anything that could disturb her state of mind.”

On the big screen, Fei Du spoke. “Auntie, if my own mother were still alive, she would be about the same age as you.”

Luo Wenzhou heard this and subconsciously looked up at him, but even as he looked, his steps didn’t stop. He quickly crossed the square’s open ground, hurrying towards the next building. “Group 3, the rooftops of the buildings overlooking the street all have security cameras. You can check them directly, no need to waste time. Tao Ran, take care to disperse the traffic over there. Group 4, come with me to the eastern Gemini Building, there are some floors under construction, it’s a serious possibility.”

Fei Du’s somewhat downcast voice relentlessly pursued his hurried steps. “…I came home more frequently than Zhongyi. After all, he had to work hard to save money to pay for your treatment, while I was only an idle student. Every weekend, she would change the flowers for fresh ones, pour out her efforts preparing my favorite things to eat, clean my room, air out my quilt. She didn’t like having a housekeeper around, so she had to do all these things herself.—Did you also air out Zhongyi’s quilt for him?”

Past endurance, Wang Xiujuan let out a long sob, which was shortly picked up and drawn away by the wind.

The sobbing wind swirled down from the building’s rooftop, brushing past Luo Wenzhou’s sweat-soaked temples like a sigh.

“But one day, I came home full of expectation and opened the door. I found there was only a pile of dried twigs in the vase at the door. All the curtains were closed, and the rooms were full of a smell like

death. When I reached her room, trembling with fear, what I found wasn't an aired-out quilt, but her corpse." Fei Du paused slightly. "Not long ago, you said to me, my mother must have looked forward to me coming home every day. But back then, the policeman who worked the case told me that the night before I came back, she killed herself.—I came home at the same time every weekend. She knew that.

"Mom, I've always wanted to ask you a question. What kind of mother would choose that time, leaving her corpse for her child to find on purpose? I thought every day about how to be good to you, how to make you happy—how to save money so I could pay for your treatment, how to repay the person who'd lent me the money for your surgery… I still haven't returned the money, and now I'm alone in a freezer and can't return home. Are you planning to leave me here? If you're all so heartless, then why did you act like you cared about us so much before?"

Straddling the guard rail, Wang Xiujuan slowly crouched down.

Fei Du stopped for a moment, touched the microphone again, silently counting to five.

At the same time, in a corner of the image, the mysterious rental car's make, model, and license plate number appeared. Wang Xiujuan's education level was limited, and she couldn't make anything of the words and numbers, but the passersby all around read them and one after another got out their phones and spread the information to their friends and family.

"Captain Luo, the Gemini Building's construction team says they're using the weekend to overhaul the building's electric system. They turned off the power over an hour ago."

Luo Wenzhou's back was soaked with sweat, making him

experience something of what old Lian Po[35] had gone through wearing thorns to humbly apologize. He would have liked nothing better than to part ways with his back, leave his spine responsible for his internal organs, and decamp, exiting the marriage without property.

He looked up at the tall tower and clenched his teeth. “Let’s go up.”

Fei Du was silent for a while, then, slowing his speech, broke off the purposeful confusion between himself and He Zhongyi. “Auntie, the murderer hasn’t been caught yet, and you don’t understand any of the circumstances. Doing this in such a muddle, how do you plan to tell Zhongyi? I implore you, wherever you are now, could you come as quickly as possible to the square? We’re all looking for you. We’ll go catch the murderer together, and when he’s caught, you’ll still have to take Zhongyi home, and I still want to speak with you for a while.

“Could you…give me another chance to pretend I’m seeing my mom?”

Wang Xiujuan at last began to wail.

She cried her soul out, the courage that had made her want to throw herself in this city’s face flowing east into the sea with her tears. She once more weakened into a lost and nervous woman who had just come to Yan City. When she looked down from on high, she suddenly even felt that her legs were a little weak.

Wang Xiujuan turned her gaze away but couldn’t keep her footing. She tried grabbing the guard rail, wanting to draw her foot back in, but at that moment there was a great change—

The seemingly firm guard rail was actually only loosely held in place. Wang Xiujuan was entirely unprepared. When she grabbed it,

the broken railing swung out. She lost her balance and went falling back.

Wang Xiujuan's eyes opened wide. Her mind roared.

At the last moment, a human figure flashed over and grabbed her foot, just held up by the half-loose railing. The woman struggled instinctively, and her thin ankle nearly slipped from his hand.

Her weight pulled at Luo Wenzhou's arms, and his just sealed back instantly tore open, as if he was being split in two. Clinging to one thought, he held onto her and roared, "Don't move!"

Fortunately he hadn't come up alone. The people following quickly dashed over, and three minutes later, all working together, they had pulled up Wang Xiujuan, who had lost consciousness.

Luo Wenzhou ordinarily felt that he could ascend to heaven and go three hundred rounds of battle with Sun Wukong, but now he had over-exerted himself so much he could barely stand up. He staggered backwards a few steps, then simply dropped inelegantly to the ground, gasping for breath, waiting until he heard someone say, "Captain Luo, she's alive!"

His muscles, tensed into a knot until then, relaxed.

As soon as he relaxed, Luo Wenzhou found that the blood and sweat on his back had mixed together. The pain made him suck in a shaking breath. "*Hss*… Fuck, I'm just about done for…"

Just then, Lang Qiao's voice came over the walkie-talkie in his pocket. "Chief, a couple just reported seeing the suspect's car in the landscape park. The lights were on inside and they were afraid the murderer was still in there, so they didn't dare to go over!"

“A park? Where?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“About a kilometer from the central square, I think. It’s pretty deserted at night. No one but couples sneaking around goes there.”

“That’s not right. It can’t be that far away,” Luo Wenzhou said amidst the insistent pain. He closed his eyes. “Coordinate with the repair team, make them turn on the building’s emergency power supply. Turn on all the security cameras, position people to watch the cameras’ blind spots.—This murderer sent a lawyer to keep track of the investigation, and he kidnapped someone right from the City Bureau. I don’t believe he’d be willing to quietly hide away from everyone when he hadn’t seen the outcome he wanted yet.”

CHAPTER 27 - Julien XXVI

These tall buildings presented icy exteriors. Their straight-up-and-down trunks were oppressive. Their lobbies were usually floored in bright, reflective stone, and the front desk attendants and security guards would fix their gazes on anyone who set foot inside.

Each building had its own distribution of elevators—all the elevators had their own systems. Some couldn't go up, some couldn't go down, some distinguished between odd and even floors, some could only be used after swiping a card; they formed a body unto themselves, often leaving strangers at sea, leading them to feel estranged from these repellant little "states."

But the Gemini Building was different. Even though it had already been completely redecorated, it was still as familiar to him as the palm of his hand—he had done an internship here for half a year, but afterwards he hadn't stayed, because they'd just had to have an exchange student from a "well-known school" who only understood European and American legal systems.

There was no comparing the present to the past. These people waving around attractive legal assignments could only review a basic contract. In order to handle any matter that required a very high level of specialization, they had to ask him to come back and act as adviser. In this building, the intern Xiao Zhao had become "Mr. Zhao" with the wave of a hand.

But each corridor, each stairwell hidden in the shadows, was carefully recorded in his mind. Even if the power hadn't been turned off, he still had the assurance of being able to avoid the building's security cameras.

But sadly, while all the conditions were perfect, someone had upset

his plans.

When he'd been mixed in with the crowd, ready to watch a splendid "performance" on the Skyscreen only to be interrupted midway by Fei Du, he'd flown into a rage. He'd decided almost at once that this was a base publicity stunt—perhaps he was supporting his drinking buddy, and perhaps there was some commercial purpose.

These people controlled assets and social resources that it was hard for him to imagine, even though each one was a blockhead, even though listening to an ordinary due diligence report could have them ready to pass out, yawning their heads off—if through the efforts of countless experts they could occasionally pretend to issue one or two obvious conclusions, then they would immediately be lauded as "young geniuses."

A policeman leading several security guards temporarily hired to help with the evening performance hurried over to maintain order. "Everyone, please don't hang around near the high rises. We're still investigating the rooftops, there's a chance of danger here. Will you cooperate? Thank you, sorry, it's for your safety…"

Hearing this, the crowd slowly moved away. No one noticed a fair and refined man turning and disappearing into the darkness.

The police dispersing the crowd here clearly indicated that they would soon come to search, and that stupid woman still hadn't jumped.

He didn't know whether she'd gotten scared at the last moment, or whether she'd been hoodwinked by that pretty boy's inferior performance. In accordance with reason, he had a contingency plan —only one side of the rooftop of Tower A faced the central square. He had fixed up the guard rail so that even if she hesitated at the

last moment, the loosened guard rail would help her make her decision.

His arrangements ought to have been foolproof. What had gone wrong?

He had to go back to look.

He considered briefly and pulled out a crafty idea. He didn't go into Tower A, but went around to one side of Tower B, going in through the side door of a coffee shop on the ground floor of the office building. He familiarly went up the emergency passage specially provided for package and fast-food delivery people, running up to the eighth floor—there was an open-air corridor linking the two towers, connected to the eighth floor emergency stair.

There was a camera at the entrance to the open-air corridor, but that was all right. There was a wall of greenery on one side of the corridor, with enough space in the gap behind it for a person to pass through. It was a camera blind spot. Even though he knew that the Gemini Building's power was off and the security cameras were all only for show, he still decided to take his prudence to the limit.

The power being off truly was the best gift fate could have given him.

Feeling pleased with himself, he walked briskly through the greenery wall, failing to note that the wind of his passing had touched a plant climbing the wall and set it shaking.

The greenery wall blocked the camera, and he didn't notice that as the leaves trembled faintly, the security camera, which had been still as death, suddenly turned a very slight angle—

Luo Wenzhou came down following the EMTs and saw Wang

Xiujuan to the ambulance. He turned his head and saw Tao Ran and a few criminal policemen escorting a delicate-featured man to a police car. This man, whom he'd seen once before, felt his gaze; his enraged, hateful look at once shot towards Luo Wenzhou.

Tao Ran gestured at him, raising the evidence bag in his hand. Inside it was a pair of gloves.

Luo Wenzhou nodded, put a cigarette in his mouth, and looked the prisoner up and down.

The man roared at him in outrage. "I just came back to fetch a document, why did you guys grab me? Do you have evidence? The police can't solve the case so they just grab some innocent person off the street and stick him with the blame? Let go, you barbarians, if you wrinkle my clothes you won't be able to be pay for it!"

"Wow, precious," said Luo Wenzhou, cigarette in his mouth, "I'm so scared. Looks like this poor wretch will have to borrow some money from Daddy Fei."

Watching the man being forced into the police car, Luo Wenzhou raised his hand and blew him a kiss. "Bye-bye."

He had just spoken when a hand reached over and rudely pulled the cigarette out of his mouth.

Lang Qiao's makeup had worn off long ago, revealing the circles around her eyes picked up from running around half the night, so noticeable that there was nothing left of her face but her eyes. She casually threw the cigarette into a garbage can a few steps away, then pointed at the ambulance behind her. "You get in there, too!"

Luo Wenzhou: "…"

“Look at you!” Lang Qiao criticized irritably. “Hurry up and get in. Tomorrow, behave yourself and stay in the hospital. Don’t come back.”

With a sigh, Luo Wenzhou said, “Daughter, you aren’t yet grown and already planning to seize your imperial father’s authority?”

Lang Qiao steamed at the ears, jabbing at him with a sharp finger. “You…”

“Hey, don’t fuss,” Luo Wenzhou interrupted her. “Do you know where President Fei went?”

Lang Qiao froze. She subconsciously looked up at the Skyscreen. It was already broadcasting the closing ceremony rehearsal. It had reached the end now, the fireworks so splendid they dazzled the eye. Though compared to the cops-and-robbers film from earlier, fireworks weren’t all that interesting. The surrounding crowds became bored and went to scroll through their social media.

“I don’t know, I haven’t seen him. Why do you want…” Lang Qiao twisted her neck in a circle. When she had turned her head back, Luo Wenzhou was gone.

Luo Wenzhou picked up a jacket someone had left in a police car and threw it on, covering up the bloodstains. He called Fei Du’s phone; it rang, but no one picked up. Luo Wenzhou then strode over to the Trade Center and went in. First he went to the control room, where he found the workers eating a midnight snack. He questioned them and learned that Fei Du had already left.

He clarified the approximate direction he’d gone in, then went after him, calling as he walked. In the end, he finally faintly heard the “You Raise Me Up” ringtone behind the building.

Luo Wenzhou followed the sound and found a small garden, surrounded by shrubs, with some stone chairs and tables inside. By looking up you could see a corner of the Skyscreen. There were no streetlights.

Fei Du was sitting on one of the blocks of stone, not worried about getting dirty, leaning against a stone table. His phone was set down, playing like a public loudspeaker.

Luo Wenzhou hung up the phone and went over. “You want me to play a little song for you, is that it?”

Fei Du didn’t feel like paying attention to him. He closed his eyes, looking like he was already asleep.

Luo Wenzhou stiffened his upper body and sat down several steps away from him. “Why don’t you go see her?”

Fei Du spoke indolently. “Isn’t she safe?”

“The murderer loosened the guard rail on the rooftop,” said Luo Wenzhou. “It was a close call.”

Fei Du’s hand, tapping out a beat, paused at once. Opening his eyes to look at Luo Wenzhou, he just happened to meet his gaze.

Luo Wenzhou’s face was haggard. When he sat, his back was unnaturally stiff; he looked as if he was half-paralyzed.

But there were two lights reflected in his eyes, flickering slightly, not scorching.

For a moment, Fei Du felt this fairly familiar man become a little strange.

Luo Wenzhou's features were clear and handsome, his figure as good as before. His age wasn't very evident. If you said he was thirty, people would believe it, and if you said he was twenty, they would probably believe that, too—although Fei Du knew that in reality he hadn't looked like this when he'd been just past twenty.

Back then Luo Wenzhou had been a true young master, deeply accomplished in cockiness, always showing off his cleverness and very unwilling to spare anyone's feelings. His exterior had resembled his interior, always having a flamboyant and domineering flavor of immaturity.

But now, his outward appearance was like a stone carving that had been worn by the passing ages. The originally blurred outlines had come clear, while the spirit floating on top had settled; seen from a greater depth, it was unexpectedly almost gentle.

Luo Wenzhou shifted his posture slightly. "What you said on the Skyscreen just now, was that true?"

Fei Du carelessly raised his eyebrows. "Of course not. I was just blending my own experiences with hers, trying to establish an emotional connection."

Luo Wenzhou hesitated for a moment—he had little experience speaking properly to Fei Du. They had always entered the personal attacks stage at the first misstep. He considered for a long time without settling on the appropriate wording and could only continue as before, saying whatever came to mind.

"I investigated your dad back then," said Luo Wenzhou.

This wasn't at all novel. A woman dies in her home without a sound and her only child maintains that she didn't commit suicide—for insurance, aside from the forensic evidence, the people close to her

would also have to be looked into slightly. Therefore, Fei Du looked at him a little impatiently, wanting to make him stop saying useless things.

“In the process, I found that there was another group of people following him. I grabbed them and asked what they were doing, and found that they were a bunch of unemployed young men calling themselves ‘private detectives.’ You were the one paying them, right?”

Fei Du’s patience came to an end. He stood up to go.

“There was another time when you were doing your homework at Tao Ran’s house and left behind a few pieces of unused graph paper. There were indentions on it, and I went over them with pencil and found that it was your father’s itinerary. It was already more than two years after your mom’s death. I thought then, these two years and more, had you always been keeping track of your dad’s whereabouts?” Luo Wenzhou paid no attention to Fei Du’s bearing, quietly saying, “I thought that was horrifying, and then when your father had his accident…”

Having heard this much, Fei Du’s steps paused. He was just passing Luo Wenzhou. Suddenly, he laughed silently.

He looked down at Luo Wenzhou, his gaze a little dangerous, and asked, “You suspected it was my doing?”

Luo Wenzhou looked directly into his eyes, which could throw out peach blossoms at any time, and couldn’t help being moved—this brat really was well worth looking at.

Fei Du bent slightly, put a finger next to his lips, and in a voice almost as quiet as a whisper said to him, “It may very well have been me, Captain Luo. Think about it, whether he died or became

brain dead, I was the only heir to his enormous property, as long as…"

He hadn't reached the end of his words when Luo Wenzhou suddenly forcibly interrupted his pretentious performance. He grabbed his collar, pulled his neck down, and smacked him on the forehead with the palm of his hand.

His palm was very hot. Fei Du felt like he'd been hit by an iron. Stupefied, he backed up half a step.

"I'm talking nicely to you, why are you being so obnoxious?" said Luo Wenzhou.

Fei Du came around and angrily pulled at his collar.—Who was the obnoxious one!

Luo Wenzhou's next words were: "But I suddenly thought, a person willing to open up his own chest in public to save a woman who was a complete stranger to him must not be a dangerous person. I was planning to apologize to you for all these years of prejudice and suspicion."

Fei Du froze. But before the sneer he was brewing had matured, he felt an entirely unexpected weight on his collar as Luo Wenzhou heavily fell forward right onto him.

Fei Du instantly felt that he'd been wrapped up in a scalding electric blanket. After a blank pause, he tentatively touched Luo Wenzhou's forehead with the back of his hand. It was burning, feverish enough to send up steam.

Fei Du pinched the edge of his jacket and lifted it to take a look; after that look he immediately twisted his head away—he wanted to throw up again.

He stood still in this strange position for a while, calmed his roiling stomach with difficulty, then stared expressionlessly at Luo Wenzhou, as if he were considering whether this piece of pork belly would be better stewed or sautéd.

Then he must have thought that this person was coarse and tough, the texture of the meat too old. Fei Du gave a “tsk” of disdain, bent, and tried out a few positions. He didn’t want to carry him on his back or in his arms. He tried pulling him up over his shoulder by his belt but found that this bit of goods was rather heavy.

Fei Du tossed the unconscious Luo Wenzhou aside on a stone chair, picked up his phone, which would soon be out of battery, and called Tao Ran.

“Hello, is this 110?” In a tone that wasn’t nice at all, he said, “I’ve picked up an old man, and I think he’s about to bite it. How do I hand him in to the state?”

CHAPTER 28 - Julien XXVII

Luo Wenzhou lay facedown on his hospital bed, bored to death. Owing to his record of jailbreaking, he was being watched especially closely. He faintly heard Tao Ran talking to the doctor; after a while, the doctor left, the door of the hospital room creaked open, and he heard the steps of soft-soled leather shoes.

Without turning his head, Luo Wenzhou began to recite his lines. “I can’t go on. You have to…hurry a marry a good man, and when you’re married to another, don’t mistreat Yiguo. Yiguo’s fate has been cruel, a motherless child…”

Tao Ran coughed several times as if he’d eaten chicken feathers.

Luo Wenzhou heard that there was something wrong and quickly twisted his head around to look. He saw their Director Lu standing next to him with his hands behind his back.

Director Lu answered affably, “I’d like that, but I’m so old, no one would have me!”

Luo Wenzhou: “…”

Propping himself up on the hospital bed, he quickly sat up. “Director Lu.”

Lu Youliang put his briefcase aside, bluntly sat down, and put a hand up to his close-cropped hair. Pointing to the top of his head, he said, “Do you see that, little monkeys? In one night, half of my hair has gone white.”

Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran, one sitting and one standing, didn’t dare to speak.

“This morning, first the higher-ups called me in for questioning, and then I hurried over to see Wang Hongliang.” Lu Youliang sighed. “That piece of work. He clung to my sleeve and wept, saying his supervision had been lax, that a leader’s responsibilities were serious, and also that he requested the association not deal leniently with him. He’s simply…”

As a quality leader facing his juniors, Lu Youliang in the end managed to swallow down the profanity that came after this.

He shook his head gloomily. “What have Huang Jinglian and his crew given up?”

“Two groups have been taking turns questioning them,” said Tao Ran. “We’ll see how long they can stick it out. Other than that, I’ve requested a search of Wang Hongliang’s personal assets, although at the moment it seems that his assets have already been moved. On the face of it, he’s clean.”

“No matter how much investigation it takes, we have to grab him by the tail. We must have hard evidence for this, everything needs to be solid. Otherwise, we won’t be able to answer for ourselves to anyone.”

Hearing this, Luo Wenzhou suddenly had a thought. “Uncle Lu, what about Director Zhang?”

With such a big mess coming out of the sub-bureau, the real higher authority whose supervision had been inadequate was Director Zhang, and in addition to that, Zhang Donglai had been implicated in a homicide case.

This didn’t need to be spoken to be understood. Lu Youliang sighed and put his hand on Luo Wenzhou’s shoulder.

Then he turned and looked at Tao Ran. “What about He Zhongyi’s case? What’s the connection between the two cases?”

Tao Ran wasn’t like Luo Wenzhou, who could offer anyone a cheeky grin. In front of Director Lu, he was somewhat nervous and subconsciously stood up straight, back to the wall. “In the small hours of the morning, we arrested the suspect Zhao Haochang. We found a pair of gloves in his pocket, which had paint and iron filings on them. The suspect must have been wearing these gloves when he damaged the security railing on the roof of the Gemini Building. But he’s very sly. He only acknowledges loosening the railing as a ‘practical joke’ and utterly denies everything else. Also, he claims that he has an alibi for the night of May 20th.”

“Don’t you have conclusive evidence that on the night of the twentieth the victim disappeared on Wenchang Street?” asked Lu Youliang.

“The security cameras only caught the victim getting off the bus at Wenchang Intersection. Afterwards we lost track of him,” said Tao Ran. “And Zhao Haochang’s colleagues say that he was working overtime at the office the whole time. We can’t say he was the killer just because the victim passed by his office. We still haven’t revealed to Zhao Haochang that we have that security camera footage.—He’s a lawyer. Though he doesn’t specialize in criminal law, he’s very quick. It’s likely he would hear that that’s the only card in our final hand, and it would put us on the defensive.”

Luo Wenzhou laughed bitterly, feeling that there really was a meeting of the minds between Fei Du and Zhao Haochang, those two beasts in human clothing. Their lines of thought about the alibi were exactly the same. “Has Wang Xiujuan been able to identify him?”

“The victim Wang Xiujuan says that the person who picked her up last night was wearing dark glasses and a face mask. He was also wearing a wig, and he’d changed his clothes. It was hard to determine his appearance.” Tao Ran paused. “We showed her a photograph of Zhao Haochang, and she doesn’t seem to have recognized him. It’s about the same with the rental car company. The wig and the jacket that the suspect used were both found in the abandoned rental car. We couldn’t pick up any fingerprints. Should our next step be to consider a lie detector?”

“You can get it ready,” said Luo Wenzhou, thinking, “but there’s no rush. There’s a point we haven’t cleared up. What is the connection between He Zhongyi’s case and the sub-bureau’s?”

Before Tao Ran could speak, his phone suddenly vibrated twice.

Lu Youliang and Luo Wenzhou looked at him. Tao Ran raised his head. “A piece of bad news, and a lead that may or may not be useful.—The bad news is, the bloodstains on Zhang Donglai’s tie have undergone DNA analysis. The blood does belong to the victim He Zhongyi.”

Lu Youliang stood up, his expression rather grave.

“And the lead?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“The lead is that Wang Xiujuan has just remembered the person in the photograph. She says that he looks very much like a boy from her village called ‘Zhao Fengnian,’ only he’s changed so much that she didn’t recognize him at first.”

Zhao Fengnian—‘Fengnian[36]’-ge.

Luo Wenzhou wanted to stand up at once. He made it halfway and nearly keeled over. “*Hss*… Someone…someone told me that it’s

very likely the murderer had a record. Immediately look into the whole history from ‘Zhao Fengnian’ to ‘Zhao Haochang,’ focusing on any unsolved cases of suspicious death among people close to him!”

Lu Youliang repeated the words “someone told me,” then frowned. “On that subject, I heard that that valiant car owner later paid full price for five minutes of broadcasting rights on the East Flower Market District’s Skyscreen during the closing ceremony rehearsal, and performed a suicide intervention for Wang Xiujuan? How much did the broadcasting rights cost?”

“He said it wasn’t much,” Tao Ran answered very sincerely. “Not as expensive as that car of his.”

Director Lu felt a trend among the few remaining black hairs on his head to turn white.

“Your Criminal Investigation Team…” The old man considered the sum of money he had heard about, and his blood pressure started to rise. He deliberately asked, “Do you understand the situation? Is there a female comrade who’s encountered some trouble in her ‘personal emotional life?’”

Speechless, Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran looked at each other helplessly.

Lu Youliang seriously reviewed the young women on the Criminal Investigation Team and uncertainly asked, “It couldn’t be Xiao Lang?”

Having said this, he himself thought that that fool Lang Qiao wouldn’t have attracted a domineering director-general. He looked at Luo Wenzhou again. Lu Youliang remembered some “secrets” that to this day he’d been unable to entirely accept and suddenly

glowered, pointing at Luo Wenzhou. “It’s not your doing, is it?”

Luo Wenzhou immediately said, “Injustice! A singular injustice throughout the ages!”

Director Lu had yet to relax when Luo Wenzhou blinked, thought for a moment, and nodded once with a great show of earnestness. “Although it sounds like that’s my bad luck.—Alas, he’s too much of a bastard. If I spent a whole day with him, I’d die of anger eight times. So never mind.”

Lu Youliang hadn’t expected his shamelessness to be this far-ranging and was so angry his blood pressure shot directly up to 180. Speechless, he pointed at Luo Wenzhou. “Time is tight and the task is pressing. Anyone who pulls any shenanigans had better look out!”

But when Tao Ran had seen the furious leader out and returned to the hospital room, he found Luo Wenzhou sneakily smoking out an open window.

“Where’d you get that?”

“From Old Man Lu’s pocket,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Hey, are you my brother? I need to run off in a bit, will you cover for me?”

Tao Ran’s temples throbbed. “What are you going to do *now*?”

“Chen Yuan—that black-cab-driving kid’s sister. She died an unnatural death half a month ago. Before that, she’d phoned a girl she hadn’t contacted in a long time. I’ve been thinking that there was something unusual about the call, and I want to go find her and clear it up.”

“Does it have to be today?” Tao Ran said helplessly.

Luo Wenzhou tapped out his cigarette ash. “The sooner the better. There’s too much pressure at the bureau.”

Frowning, Tao Ran considered their captain’s pitiful appearance. He wanted to say something, but he felt it would have been a waste. He had to come to compromise. “All right. What’s the girl’s name? What does she do?”

“Cui Ying. She’s a second-year graduate student at Yan West Polisci.”

Tao Ran froze at once. “Yan West Polisci? Then was the Chen Yuan who died also at Yan West Polisci?

“What’s wrong?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“Zhao Haochang graduated from Yan West Polisci!” Tao Ran said quickly. “Last year I think he got an invitation from their academic advisor and came back to supervise some real world experience for the students!”

Luo Wenzhou stubbed his cigarette out on the windowsill. “Shit. Let’s go!”

At this time, in another hospital room, Lang Qiao, not blinking an eye, was listening to He Zhongyi’s mother Wang Xiujuan speak.

Fei Du was next to them, wearing single-use gloves and peeling an apple.—Reasonably speaking, he shouldn’t have been there, but Wang Xiujuan had nearly committed suicide and then gotten a huge scare. Her mood had been unstable since she’d woken up. She’d become an “elderly child” who needed to have a “guardian” present before she could say a few complete sentences.

So Fei Du had become her temporary “guardian.”

Lang Qiao quietly asked, “Did He Zhongyi mention to you that he’d met Zhao Fengnian in Yan City?”

Mother He shook her head in small arcs.

“In relation to this Zhao Fengnian, do you remember anything else? You weren’t able to recognize him at first. Is that because he hadn’t come back to your village for many years?”

Mother He looked at Fei Du.

Fei Du didn’t cut in. He smiled at her encouragingly, and cut up the peeled apple into small slices. He arranged them on a paper plate, added two toothpicks, and waved the plate between the two women. “This is dry work. Have some vitamins.”

“He had nothing to come back for,” said Mother He slowly, her voice a little hoarse. “His family was gone.

“At home there was a crippled father and a mute mother. Aside from him, there were three other children—two girl children and a boy child. The family was very poor. They barely managed to raise up a university student, and everyone was saying that good luck was on the way, but one winter, in the middle of the night, a village idiot got shut out by his family. He had nowhere to go, so he drifted, lit a fire to keep warm, and accidentally set fire to the big tree at the Zhao family’s gate. The wind was very strong, howling, but everybody was asleep, and no one noticed. The idiot didn’t have any sense, didn’t know to call for help… The burning tree snapped and fell on the roof. It came crashing down. The whole family, old and young…except for the eldest, Fengnian, who wasn’t home then and escaped the disaster, they all died. It was too awful!”

CHAPTER 29 - Julien XXVIII

Aside from a “learning to farm” field trip organized by her school when she was little, Lang Qiao had never left the city. Having heard this much, for a time she couldn’t comprehend it and couldn’t resist following up, “No, what you’re saying is… A tree at the Zhao family’s gate caught fire and fell, and the whole family burned to death? Did the whole family live in a single room?”

“Their house was a bad one,” Mother He explained softly. “We’re behind the times over there, I remember…it was after we had Zhongyi that it became normal to re-roof houses with brick and tile. Their family’s man couldn’t work, and there were a lot of children, they could barely manage to live. Where would they get the money to put up a new roof? They always lived in the old house. If a bit of snow fell in winter you had to sweep it away at once, or else the roof would come down.

“They’d managed to get their eldest out to study, and the whole family had such hopes for him. The old couple praised heaven and earth, said their son was working in the city, he had money, the family could rely on him and put up a new roof, and the deaf-mute youngest and the second girl would have hope, too. The roof had just been stripped off the wing then, the two girls had nowhere to stay, so they slept on the floor of their parents’ room. When the burning tree came down, the ceiling beam collapsed, and the old couple were crushed right away. The two girls were both still young. One got her leg trapped, and the other one couldn’t hear. Maybe she was a little slow, too. She panicked and tried to pull her little sister out, so she couldn’t get out herself. The little one wasn’t even two years old. There’s nothing to say, there.”

Lang Qiao was stunned for a long time, then quickly opened her notebook. “The fire happened while the house was being repaired?

Where was Zhao Haochang—Zhao Fengnian at the time? In Yan City?"

Mother He thought about it for an age. "No, I think he'd come back home especially because of the house… But he wasn't there that day. He'd gone to the county seat to see his teacher or something. Oh, it would have been better if he'd been there. That family of little ones and cripples, if there'd been a perfectly good sturdy young man there, how could they have come to an end like that?"

This unusual story made Lang Qiao break out in gooseflesh. "Then…how did they know it was the idiot who'd done it?"

"He was right there, with a box of matches in his hand. When the first people came to put out the fire, they saw him sitting nearby, totally unconcerned, burning leaves for fun. They asked whether he'd set the fire, he giggled and nodded."

"How was this handled afterwards?"

"How else could it be handled? Like that. An idiot who didn't understand anything, what could you do to him? His parents were gone, his brother and sister-in-law saw him as a burden, the sister-in-law made a scene all over the place, said her family had no money, they weren't responsible, told them to go tie him up and shoot him. The police station in town sent people. When they saw that it was an idiot, they couldn't do anything, either. They took some photographs and left."

Lang Qiao spoke. "How could they not be responsible? If an incompetent individual injures another person's life or property, wouldn't the guardians bear the liability?"

Mother He looked back at her in confusion and fear. She didn't understand this imperial edict Lang Qiao had pronounced.

Lang Qiao exchanged a helpless look with her, then suddenly noticed that she'd said something stupid and felt so awkward she forgot how to speak for a time.

Just then, Fei Du, who hadn't uttered a sound all this time, put in a timely word. "Do you remember what kind of person this Zhao Fengnian was? What his relationship with Zhongyi was like?"

"Of course I remember. The whole village knew that the Zhao family's eldest had great prospects. Zhongyi and the other little ones were always following him around. He was a big boy, not willing to play with them, he would usually say something to get them to leave him alone, but with those little idiots it was always 'Fengnian-ge this, Fengnian-ge that.'" Mother He had said this much when she thought of something, and her eyes reddened. Someone passed her a wet paper towel, and she took it and mopped her face for a long time. "The Zhao family's eldest was pretty studious, when he was at home he didn't go out, just sat alone indoors reading. When he'd go out in the fields to help his family, if he met anyone he knew from the village, he'd say hello and nothing else. He was a very quiet child."

Fei Du nodded thoughtfully. "And afterwards, this Zhao Fengnian never went back."

"I didn't know where he'd gone. I never expected he was in the city, and he'd changed his name and become so important…" Mother He's words suddenly paused, and her eyes slowly opened wide. She seemed to be awakening from a dream. "The person driving the car who took me away yesterday was the Zhao family's eldest? I…I didn't recognize him! Why…why didn't he tell me? Does he have something to do with my son's case?"

Fei Du sighed and leaned slightly forward. Using a soothing voice,

he said, “They’re still investigating. Why did you go with him? What did he say to you?”

“He said…that he was a person who specially handled lawsuits for people. That there was a person surnamed Liu who did the same job, and he was that rich person’s…—that person who came to the Public Safety Bureau last night.”

“Attorney Liu,” said Fei Du.

“Right, attorney. He said this Attorney Liu had evidence of who the killer was, and he’d snuck over to the Public Safety Bureau to report it because his conscience was bothering him, but there was no use having evidence, because the murderer was an important person, the police didn’t dare to touch him. My son would have died for nothing… I panicked, asked him what to do. He said, in this society, if you want to right a wrong, you have to make a splash—”

When Tao Ran took Lang Qiao’s phone call, he was serving as driver, taking Captain Luo, lightly wounded and refusing to leave the front, towards Yan West Polisci.

“I sent someone to investigate. When Zhao Haochang had just graduated, he didn’t have money to rent an apartment and lived in the West Flower Market District for the better part of a year. That should explain why he’s so familiar with the West District’s terrain. Also, I confirmed with Attorney Liu that Zhao really was very concerned with Zhang Donglai’s case. Before Zhang Donglai was released, he paid even closer attention than Zhang Ting.” Lang Qiao took a breath and continued, “And Attorney Liu also says, since the business of the tie concerned his career, he didn’t breathe a word about it to anyone but the police, not even his wife. Zhao Haochang definitely couldn’t have known.”

The phone was on speaker in the car. Luo Wenzhou interrupted her.

“But he can quibble and say all important people are like that, or perhaps he’ll simply say that it was something he made up to fool Wang Xiujuan. ‘Make a splash’ doesn’t necessarily mean he was telling her to go kill herself. He just meant for her to cry out her wrongs in public—it’s too vague, is there anything stronger?”

“Not yet, although there’s something very fishy about what happened to his family. If it had happened to an ordinary villager and then been left unresolved, I’d believe it, but Zhao Haochang was already working then. Would he have let it go at that? He seems to be pretty competent at manipulating public opinion.”

“Write up a report quickly, go through the formalities, and obtain the official records of the Zhao family’s case from their town’s police station.” Luo Wenzhou considered. “Can we trace the phone he gave He Zhongyi?”

Lang Qiao sighed. “Smuggled goods. We can’t track it.”

“What about the 100,000 yuan?” said Luo Wenzhou.

A voice unhurriedly put in a word from beside Lang Qiao. “In some rather intricate M&A projects, a ‘reliable’ legal advisor will often get some gray income[37]. Sometimes it may simply be cold hard cash. You won’t find it.”

Luo Wenzhou: “…”

It was clearly an objective statement. Then why did it seem like a provocation coming out of a certain person’s mouth?

“What brilliant ideas does President Fei have?” said Luo Wenzhou.

The phone line was silent for a while, and Luo Wenzhou was thinking that he’d just put in a word and left—that was something

Fei Du would do—but then, Fei Du suddenly said, “I called Zhang Donglai this morning and asked if he remembered where his tie had gone. It turns out that he didn’t even know he’d lost the tie. He thought about it for ages before he remembered and said that the day of the party at Chengguang Mansion, he had in fact gone to work during the day. In the evening he changed at the office in order to attend the event and left his previous outfit there. He couldn’t have put something as big as a tie in his pants pocket. If he lost it when he changed, then my earlier inference was perhaps in error. When Zhao Haochang took that tie, he must not have known that He Zhongyi was waiting outside the mansion for him, and he didn’t know he’d use the tie to strangle someone. So his motive for doing this is worth deliberating.”

“You’re saying he simply stole it.”

“Given his income, such a small, worthless thing isn’t worth pilfering,” said Fei Du. “There’s no saying but that he was just hoarding a memento.”

Luo Wenzhou shuddered. “…hoarding Zhang Donglai’s stuff?”

“If I recall correctly, that was the first time Zhang Donglai took him to a social occasion like the one at Chengguang Mansion in a private capacity,” said Fei Du. “While chatting with He Zhongyi’s mom, I suddenly thought that his character seemed very closed-off. Perhaps he would have some special way of commemorating events. Why don’t you go investigate?”

“Er-Lang, did you hear that? Request a warrant to search Zhao Haochang’s home.” Luo Wenzhou issued a prompt decision, heard Lang Qiao’s affirmative, then quickly hung up the phone. He turned his head and expressed to Tao Ran, “An idiot burned his whole family to death, and Zhang Donglai, who’s no better than an idiot, ‘strangled’ someone from his hometown. The young genius Attorney

Zhao has truly lived surrounded by injuries from idiots of all kinds."

Tao Ran's lips moved. He didn't speak.

"And what brilliant ideas do you have, Deputy-Captain Tao?"

"Nothing." Tao Ran hesitated for a long time. "It's not about this… I just…suddenly had an outrageous idea."

"Report it to the throne. It won't kill Our Imperial Presence."

While they were stopped at a light, Tao Ran turned his head and looked at him. "What do you think, could there be someone who already knew who the murderer was before we made a breakthrough?"

"Nonsense." said Luo Wenzhou. "You killed someone, aren't you going to know about it? You need the police to affix their seal?"

"Aside from the murderer?" asked Tao Ran.

Luo Wenzhou froze. "Tao Ran, what are you trying to say?"

Just then, the light changed, and the driver behind them honked somewhat testily to hurry them. Tao Ran pursed his lips, turned back to the road, and drove on.

"It's nothing," he said. "Forget it. My imagination's running away with me. I think I could go write novels.—Yan West Polisci's graduate campus should be up ahead."

"Right." Luo Wenzhou picked up a folder. "First I'll try calling Cui Ying."

The girl's photograph, department, phone number, and other such

materials were all there. Luo Wenzhou had just dialed when several young people came out of the graduate campus's back gate. Among them, one girl fished a phone out of her bag and seemed to be hesitating about an unfamiliar incoming number.

Tao Ran looked at the students from afar, then looked at the photograph in the folder. He suddenly poked Luo Wenzhou with his elbow. "Look, doesn't that young lady look like the one you're searching for?"

As he said it, the girl picked up the phone. At the same time, a hesitant "Hello?" came over Luo Wenzhou's speaker.

"It's her." Luo Wenzhou got out of the car on the spot and called out, "Hey, Cui Ying, here, look to your right—"

The students next to her, hearing a strange young man calling to her in the middle of the street, all began teasing her. Cui Ying looked around in bewilderment. Then, her gaze fell on the police license plate. The girl's face immediately changed, as if she'd seen a ghost. Then without any warning she turned and ran!

"What's going on?" Luo Wenzhou asked Tao Ran as he gave chase. "That young woman turned and ran when she saw you. You're done for, Tao Ran, doomed to be single all your life."

Tao Ran clenched his teeth. "*You* scared her!"

Luo Wenzhou had no plans whatsoever of finding a young lady to share his days and therefore was untroubled. The two of them cooperated in tacit understanding, one chasing and the other blocking. They had nearly caught Cui Ying when she suddenly leapt heedlessly straight into the road. A taxi was just driving by. The sharp sound of its horn pierced the air.

Tao Ran deftly grabbed her by the back of her collar and pulled fiercely, yanking Cui Ying back to the side of the road. The hastily braking taxi narrowly brushed past her shoulder, the sharp wind raising the girl's hair behind her.

Recovering from his fright, the taxi driver rolled down the window and let out a torrent of abuse. A breath had caught painfully in Tao Ran's chest. He could only wave his hand in apology.

Twenty minutes later, Tao Ran and Luo Wenzhou took Cui Ying to a brightly lit cold drinks bar.

"This'll do, right? You chose the place yourself, and the street outside these French windows is full of people. If you yell, you can call over half a city's worth of people. You can send a text message to your friends telling them where you are." Luo Wenzhou irritably tossed his work ID on the table. "My badge number. You can take a photograph and post it on Weibo—but don't post my photograph directly, pixelate it or Photoshop it."

Cui Ying: "…"

Tao Ran ordered some drinks. Worried that Cui Ying's wariness was too strong, he didn't touch them but asked the clerk to put them in front of Cui Ying. "Why did you run?"

Head down, Cui Ying didn't speak.

"You're afraid of police cars…or afraid of the police?" Tao Ran asked quietly. Seeing she still didn't answer, Tao Ran lowered his voice and said, "This may be good news. The Flower Market District Sub-Bureau's Director-General Wang Hongliang was arrested last night."

Cui Ying froze immediately. Then she at last cautiously looked up.

Luo Wenzhou knocked on the table. “Be sensible, all right? Please, young lady, push up your glasses and take a good look. Have you ever seen such a handsome bad guy? If I’d wanted to make a fortune, I’d have gone out and made it with my face long ago. Would there be any need to risk breaking the law?”

“Don’t listen to his nonsense,” said Tao Ran. “Young lady, I don’t know how to make you trust us…”

Cui Ying suddenly said in a quiet voice, “Isn’t there also one surnamed Huang?”

Luo Wenzhou exchanged a look with Tao Ran.

She *did* know something!

“Huang Jinglian,” said Luo Wenzhou, becoming serious. He pulled up a mugshot on his phone. “Suspected of abusing his power, trafficking in drugs, murder, and other crimes. I arrested him last night. I’ve still got a glorious ‘silk ribbon’ on my back.”

Cui Ying subconsciously opened her mouth to speak, then tightly closed it again. She looked at Luo Wenzhou and Tao Ran, full of suspicion, trying to use all of her limited experience to judge whether these two people had truly arrested Wang Hongliang or had only concocted these facts and taken some seemingly real pictures to trick her.

She couldn’t even tell whether Luo Wenzhou’s work ID was real or fake.

“Young lady,” said Tao Ran, “do you know Chen Zhen? He was Chen Yuan’s brother. Last night, Chen Zhen died, and we caught the killers. But because we lack evidence, we can’t get to the person

behind them. Are you going to sit by and watch the bad guys get away with it?"

Cui Ying bit her lip and hesitated for a long time. She said, "I…I don't know. I have to ask my teacher."

"Why do you have to ask someone else?"

"He…he has it."

Tao Ran froze, then followed up, "He has what? Did Chen Yuan give you something?"

Just then, Luo Wenzhou hit him with his elbow.

Luo Wenzhou held out his hand to Cui Ying. "Go ahead. You can call right in front of us."

Cui Ying picked up her phone, found the name "Teacher Zhao" in her contacts and dialed. She called twice, then said in surprise, "No one's picking up…"

Of course no one was picking up. He'd spent the night squatting in a little dark room.

Luo Wenzhou, with a great show of earnestness, got out a little notebook. "How about this, give us your teacher's contact information and we'll go have a chat with him."

Cui Ying hesitated.

"Chen Yuan called you two weeks before she passed away. I think she told you something. This must all have happened around that time. Investigating which teachers you had contact with and which one of them was surnamed Zhao would be easy. I'm only asking you

to save a little effort. You've divulged this much already, anyway."

Cui Ying was flustered for a moment, then agreed.

"His name is Zhao Haochang. He's our shixiong. Our Practical Experience Class invited him to act as coach. He was there for three months," said the inexperienced girl. Then she told them a phone number. "That's his contact information."

Luo Wenzhou considered her for a moment, then suddenly said, "If I recall correctly, Chen Yuan didn't go on to a graduate program after graduation but went right to work. I guess your teacher didn't know her?"

Cui Ying didn't notice that he was fishing for facts and shook her head. "He didn't."

"I understand now," said Luo Wenzhou. "She entrusted something of vital importance to you that she was afraid of others getting their hands on. She didn't even give her brother a hint. You thought this thing was too scary, you were at your wits' end over having it, so you went to someone you trusted and left the thing with him. That's about right?"

Cui Ying's expression flickered. She didn't answer.

"You trust him so much," said Luo Wenzhou. "Your teacher must be pretty handsome?"

Cui Ying blushed.

On the one hand were the police, whom she didn't trust; on the other was the person she had a crush on. If they told her Zhao Haochang had been arrested, there was no need to say what Cui Ying's reaction would be.

Luo Wenzhou sighed inwardly. What was there to do? Seduce her?

Looking at the trembling Cui Ying, an idea suddenly flashed through his mind—

CHAPTER 30 - Julien XXIX

When she was alive, Chen Yuan must have known that none of her personal property would escape notice. Even her close relative had eyes on him—during the critical days after He Zhongyi's body was found in the West District, Wang Hongliang had gotten nervous and sent someone to shadow the clueless Chen Zhen. So what about Chen Yuan, who had waded in deeper?

She was a girl without support. How had she been able to dodge Wang Hongliang's vast nets and secretly deposit something with Cui Ying?

He didn't know at the moment whether Wang Hongliang and the others had closely investigated Chen Yuan's contacts, but it seemed that for now at least they had no quarrel with Cui Ying. Why?

There were only two possibilities. Either Wang Hongliang and his crowd of bastards were all stupid, or they thought they had already gotten what they'd wanted.

Chen Yuan had used some means to deliver something to Cui Ying, and not long after, Chen Yuan had died, and at the same time Wang Hongliang and his crew had restrained themselves and not touched Cui Ying—what did that say?

Luo Wenzhou's expression cooled.

Two possibilities: first, the naive, easily-probed girl in front of him had sold out Chen Yuan.

Second, the panic-stricken Cui Ying had consigned the whole thing to someone she trusted—Zhao Haochang.

Zhao Haochang, never mind why, had sold Chen Yuan out to Wang Hongliang.

Just then, Tao Ran's phone got a call from the City Bureau. Tao Ran listened in silence for a while, then looked down and typed on his phone for Luo Wenzhou to see.

"Wu Xuechun just finished giving her statement. She identifies Huang Jinglian and the others as having protected the drug trafficking network, participated and deducted a percentage. But she never saw Wang Hongliang."

Luo Wenzhou frowned slightly.

Tao Ran typed quickly. "As for Chen Yuan, she says they call that 'morsels' over there. Wu Xuechun's own words are: There was someone else above Huang who never showed his face. He thought the place's girls were dirty and only liked to play around outside. When he ran into a girl who was hard to 'tame,' he'd use some drugs. When he got tired of her and she was worn out, they'd drop her off over there with them.

"Wu Xuechun said that one of Huang Jinglian's crowd liked filming things. Following her identification, we found some videos on that person's computer. Most of them are group sex and drug-taking. One of them shows Chen Yuan. From the images, the medical examiner judges that she was likely dead then."

Luo Wenzhou shot Tao Ran a questioning look—had Huang Jinglian given anything up?

Tao Ran shook his head.

Luo Wenzhou silently spun a pack of cigarettes around several times, then suddenly spoke. "Have them send over that video."

His careless manner had abruptly turned solemn, startling Cui Ying.

Cui Ying looked very much like a student. Her hair was long, she wore delicate glasses, and she had a slight tendency to chew on her straw. When she opened her eyes wide and looked ahead, there was an unsophisticated innocence in them.

The innocent one was sitting here sipping a drink and jumping at shadows; the not innocent one was dead.

“When it comes, let her see it.” Having reversed his earlier buffoonery, Luo Wenzhou pushed the drinks on the table to one side. “Cui Ying, I don’t want to beat around the bush with you anymore. I’ll tell you the truth—your Teacher Zhao has been arrested.”

Cui Ying’s eyes widened. “Wh…”

Tao Ran’s phone vibrated, a segment of a video file arriving. Luo Wenzhou took the phone, opened it, and put it right in front of Cui Ying. The lights in the image were dim. There was a crowd of people in all kinds of contortions, cries rising and falling. The cameraman’s hands were unsteady, the image shaking dizzyingly.

A man wobbled out of a small door and waved a hand to the person behind the camera. “Come look, guys. I think this one’s done for.”

He’d started to laugh weirdly to himself before the words were out of his mouth; this sort of confused laughter was a typical symptom of a drug overdose. Then he bent over and dragged a naked woman out of the door behind him.

Cui Ying didn’t know what kind of restricted film this was; she subconsciously wanted to turn away her gaze, but Luo Wenzhou

stared fixedly at her. “Zhao Haochang is suspected of murder, disposing of a corpse, abduction, and other crimes.”

Gooseflesh rose on Cui Ying’s forearms.

Then, in the video on the phone, the camera suddenly pulled in close, the cameraman saying in a voice like a spoiled child’s, “Let me film her, let me film her!”

The camera lens travelled up and down Chen Yuan’s corpse, constantly focusing on her face and private parts. Cui Ying covered her mouth, looking like she was about to throw up.

At the same time, Luo Wenzhou smacked the table. “You see, this is how Chen Yuan died.”

Cui Ying stood up at once.

Luo Wenzhou said, “She trusted you, put a very important secret in your care, and you turned around and gave it to a scumbag! You let her come to this end.”

“No, it wasn’t…” Cui Ying shook her head, her voice weak.

“If it wasn’t him who sold out Chen Yuan, are you going to tell me it was you?” Luo Wenzhou asked callously. “Do you want to explain to me why she died a few days after calling you?”

Eternal Good Cop Tao quietly got into position. “Don’t scare her.—Young lady, less than two weeks after the last time Chen Yuan contacted you, she met an unnatural death. My partner isn’t lying to you about that.—Were the two of you on good terms?”

Cui Ying collapsed back into her seat. “You’re talking nonsense, Teacher Zhao isn’t that kind of person…”

Tao Ran softly asked, “Then what kind of person is he?”

“He’s very mature, and very calm… He, he said to me, there’s nothing new under the sun, he wasn’t surprised at all. The reality is that the weak are prey to the strong. The people who become carnivores by a fluke of luck will mercilessly divide up their prey’s flesh and blood…

“Only a tiger can hunt the wolves and jackals. A rabbit can only wait, wait for the right time to become a tiger itself.” In a tearful voice, Cui Ying said, “He said the police are all trash, he wouldn’t get down in the mud with them.”

Only when the words were out of her mouth did she realize that the two people in front of her were also police. She quickly broke off and sobbed silently.

“Do you believe us?” Tao Ran said.

Cui Ying twisted the edge of her clothing.

“Your Teacher Zhao has already become a tiger,” said Luo Wenzhou coldly. “Last night’s failed suicide attempt in the East Flower Market District flooded social media, did you see it?”

Tao Ran added, “Zhao Haochang committed a murder, then dumped the body in the so-called ‘Golden Triangle Lot.’—Judging by your reaction, you know the place?”

Cui Ying sucked in a breath, looking like she’d frozen stiff.

Tao Ran lowered his voice further. “What’s wrong?”

“He…he was joking with me once, and he said that if he’d killed

someone, he'd go around them and drop the body where they did their business, those pieces of trash definitely wouldn't dare to investigate…"

"Cui Ying," said Luo Wenzhou heavily, "what was it that you gave Zhao Haochang?"

"A video," said Cui Ying numbly, "just a video."

Saying it, she clenched her teeth and pulled a red cord up from around her neck. A protection amulet in the form of a chicken bone hung from the cord. She split the chicken bone in two; there was a pocket flash drive inside.

While Luo Wenzhou was sighing in gratitude that this silly child actually had something on her, Lang Qiao was leading some people into Zhao Haochang's apartment.

It was brightly lit, beautifully decorated in a rather Western style; there were huge floor-to-ceiling windows and a bar. It was located in a building in a prosperous area and had a view of awe-inspiring immensity.

At a glance, there wasn't anything unusual in his apartment. It was a typical middle class home in the city.

The searchers combed over it several times and finally determined that there were no secret doors or hidden vaults. It was as clean as a sample room in a hotel.

"There's nothing." Lang Qiao stood in the brilliantly sunlit living room, hands on her hips as she spoke to Luo Wenzhou over the phone. "Cabinets, closets… We looked under the bed, too. It's an ordinary building, the developer sold hundreds of apartments like this at the same time, there's no way they would have built him a

secret room. It's about a hundred square meters, we've gone over it centimeter by centimeter. Unless this place has an Anywhere Door[38], there can't be anything hidden here. Chief, I've looked into it, there aren't any other properties under Zhao Haochang's name. If it's really like President Fei guessed, would he have hidden something so freakish in someone else's territory?

"Oh, right." Lang Qiao paused and added, "The material about the fire came through. There's nothing useful. For one thing, it was too long ago, and for another, all the villagers said the idiot had done it, so they didn't do a thorough investigation, just took some photographs of the scene and the arsonist."

The idiot in the photograph in fact had a look of being not all there. He was dressed in a tattered jacket with only one sleeve, almost too dirty to look at, that on very close examination could be distinguished as having a delicate floral pattern.

Luo Wenzhou paused briefly. "Wait a moment. Accept the incoming videoconference request."

Lang Qiao stared, hit "Accept," and saw a computer screen on the other end. Yan City's City Bureau's entire Criminal Investigation Team, along with Director Lu, were gathered around it.

A video was playing on the computer. It had been shot with a pinhole camera. At first it faced a blurry dark background; then there was a cry, and a young woman with disheveled hair fell into the center of the screen. Her expression was vague, her face ashen. She desperately reached out a hand, seeming to be thirsting for something but also refusing.

Just then, someone spoke outside the frame. "Just about there. Give it to her."

The camera's angle shifted slowly to the person who had spoken—it was Wang Hongliang, and Huang Jinglian was next to him, bending down to say something to him in a low voice!

The whole office filled with the sound of sucked in breaths.

Director Lu raised a hand and smashed it down on a table. "This time he won't get away!"

The camera focused on the woman again and backed up a few steps. Then a tray appeared in front of the camera, and a pair of hands picked up a syringe—

A moment later the restless woman let out a long breath and twitched a couple of times as if convulsing. Then her face relaxed, showing its graceful outlines.

She lay unmoving on the small couch, exchanging a long look with the person behind the camera.

Suddenly, the image shook, as if the person behind the camera had been pushed. Huang Jinglian appeared in the frame and said urgently, "Hurry up and leave. Don't get in the way."

He pushed the person behind the camera all the way to the door, at which point the camera once again had the opportunity to focus on the inside of the room.

A cigarette in his mouth, Wang Hongliang was just strolling up next to the half-unconscious woman. He stroked her shoulder, then looked up and smiled, seeming greatly moved. In the direction of the camera, he said, "When you've seen enough of this kind, it's like eating plain congee every day. A little dull."

The person behind the camera hurriedly backed up a few steps and

shut the door of the room with a bang. The video ended.

“The woman who was injected with narcotics in that video is dead. Cause of death is again a drug overdose. The case was resolved exactly the same way as Chen Yuan’s.” Luo Wenzhou lit a cigarette. “Chen Yuan filmed that video, and not long after she was buried among the files in the same way, as if she’d recorded her own ending.

“When Chen Yuan was at school, she often worked to make some money to bring home. She had a lot of absences, and her grades weren’t especially good. After graduation, she didn’t pass the Judicial Exam[39], and because of her family background, she couldn’t stay on to pursue her studies like her classmate. At first she tried a law firm, but because she lacked the relevant credentials, her salary wasn’t ideal. To lighten the strain on her household as quickly as possible, she found a sales job with comparatively good pay and flexible hours. She wanted to get by for a while, pass the next year’s Judicial Examination, and find regular work.

“The company she worked at sold counterfeit brand-name imported liquor. The Great Fortune Building was one of their major customers. That’s where she met Huang Jinglian and the others. Huang Jinglian took a fancy to her because of her unusual qualities. Huang tricked her into drinking alcohol with some stuff in it, and that’s how she became the ‘morsel’ Wu Xuechun spoke of.”

“A university student who’d received a proper legal education.” Director Lu sighed.

“Chen Yuan originally wanted to kill herself, but when she was on the point of it, she felt unreconciled.—This is the testament Chen Yuan left for her friend Cui Ying,” said Luo Wenzhou slowly. “She used her company’s online store to place an order for Cui Ying, put all the evidence she’d collected in a package of red wine and mailed

it. This video was included, as well as some locations where they did business and their codenames, and a letter.

"'No one can save me now, but I must give myself an accounting.' That's the first line she wrote in the letter." Luo Wenzhou paused. "That's all Cui Ying knows.

"Besides that—" Luo Wenzhou turned the phone around. "Lang Qiao, are you still listening?"

"I'm here, chief. Whatever you need."

"Cui Ying revealed this matter to Zhao Haochang. Zhao Haochang heard half of it, then interrupted her, told her not to say it over the phone, and arranged to meet her at a little wineshop in a suburb. I looked into it while I was on my here; that wineshop's owner leased collective property for commercial use and illegally constructed some houses with limited property rights[40] that he later sold a part of—"

"Give me the address." Lang Qiao understood his intention and at once stood up straight, waving a hand at the people next to her. "Come with me!"

Under the burning sun, the laid-out grape trellises were a little wilted. The scattered scholar tree flowers were nearly all withered. Glumly hanging their heads, a row of little "mini-villas" was hidden silently in an unnoticed corner. The landscaping wasn't finished yet, giving them the uncouth air of the urban-rural fringe.

A crowd of police pushed aside the trembling manager, opened the door to one of the houses, and split up to search.

"There's a basement here!"

Lang Qiao was the first to go down the cramped stairwell. The smell of moisture absorber hit her in the face. She pressed the switch of the wall lamp and looked up. She was stunned.

After taking Lang Qiao's phone call, Luo Wenzhou didn't say anything. Feelings weighing heavily on him, he went to the door, putting a cigarette in his mouth.

After a week of non-stop work, the details of these two connected cases had nearly all been clarified; they'd even found persuasive evidence. But for some reason his misgivings were becoming heavier and heavier.

Tao Ran came over. "What are you thinking of now?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't want to say much and casually fobbed him off, saying, "I'm thinking of Fei Du."

"Oh?" said Tao Ran in astonishment.

Before Luo Wenzhou could speak, someone next to them asked, "Thinking of me? Curious. What noble errand does Captain Luo have?"

CHAPTER 31 - Julien XXX

Compared to Officer Tao, who'd stayed out all night, and Captain Luo, who'd just smuggled himself out of the hospital, President Fei was dressed about well enough to attend a ceremony.

This person had changed his clothes once again. As before they were a careful midpoint between stern and casual, outwardly restrained and inwardly passionate. His hair was fluffy where it ought to be fluffy and sleek where it ought to be sleek; not a strand was out of place. He was also wearing a pair of metal-framed plain glass spectacles that gave him somewhat the appearance of the scum of the literati. He had even changed his cologne.

To find Wang Xiujuan, Fei Du had nearly stayed up all night; first thing this morning, he'd apparently gone to the hospital to accompany Wang Xiujuan as she gave her statement. Who knew where he'd found the time to smarten himself up?

Though Luo Wenzhou always believed himself to be the most handsome man under the sun, faced with such a clear contrast, he really wanted to beat up the peacock in front of him—especially since the above-mentioned peacock was looking at him with ill-intent through a pair of lenses.

Luo Wenzhou cleared his throat, forcing himself to go from ready-to-curse shamed anger to the pure-hearted bearing of a transcendent being.

With great earnestness, he said, "My people found a secret residence of Zhao Haochang's and discovered some things in the basement that line up closely with your inferences. I sincerely think you're awesome, President Fei. As expected from someone with twenty years of experience specializing in the abnormal."

Next to them, Tao Ran very uncomfortably said, “I don’t know about you two, but I’m feeling a little embarrassed.”

Thus undermined, Luo Wenzhou stuck his hands in his pockets and asked Fei Du, “What are you doing here again? Is your company about to close down?”

“I came on behalf of He Zhongyi’s mom to ask about the progress of the investigation.” Fei Du tapped the watch face on his wrist. “Also, in view of your senility, I’d like to remind Captain Luo that it’s currently six o’clock in the evening on a Saturday. Neither the day nor the time is within working hours.”

Luo Wenzhou: “…”

“Ge,” said Fei Du, turning to Tao Ran, “even if you’re willing to work overtime, others should still repay your hard work by displaying their gratitude. Isn’t that only polite? Bosses who forget the weekends, forget when work ends, are all trash. I think that sort of person’s degree of odiousness is inferior only to bosses who forget to pay wages—luckily, he isn’t the one who pays yours.”

The city gates were aflame, and Tao Ran was a fish in the pond.—Tao the Fish expressionlessly beat out the flames of war on his body. “…Let’s talk about what Lang Qiao found now.”

Lang Qiao’s scalp was tingling. She stood in the stairwell, in an unprecedented move rubbing her face with her unwashed hands.

The basement was laid out like an old-fashioned library, with several enormous cabinets reaching to the ceiling. The cabinets were full of small squares, and in each square stood a clear glass jar. The jars displayed all sorts of things, with label plaques hanging below them, each with a date and event written on them.

A chill, stale, unspeakable smell came towards her. The hairs on the back of Lang Qiao's neck stood up bit by bit.

For a moment, she thought these jars were like the ones used to keep laboratory specimens in.

But the most chilling thing wasn't the cabinets; it was a floor lamp standing among them.

The body of the lamp was made in the form of a tree of very strange appearance—the stand was a "tree" just about to snap. The hollow "trunk" had lights inside it; when they were on, light spilled out of the places where the "trunk" was broken. All the branches extending from it were bare; on all those bare branches were small, slender fluorescent lights, one after another. Seen from far off, they looked like they were wrapped up in blazing fire.

The searchers made an orderly record of the articles in the cabinets and their labels.

Zhao Haochang was very methodical. From left to right, it was in strict chronological order. On the earliest one, the label said "university." Judging from the time recorded, it must have been the day that Zhao Haochang—Zhao Fengnian, just starting university, had for the first time taken the train and left H Province.

Getting into university was worth commemorating, only ordinary people would normally preserve their letters of admission, whereas Zhao Haochang, forging a path of his own, had preserved a ham sausage.

When the police took it down, the packaging on this long-expired ham sausage wasn't even slightly torn.

This wasn't the only bizarre thing; there were also a number of other things that no one could make heads or tails of. From his internship period, he'd collected such items as cotton socks, a wrist brace, a storage disk, and other such odds and ends. To an outsider the collected items and the events recorded on the labels seemed to have almost no relationship between them, giving a very perplexing impression.

"Qiao'er." A comparatively nimble colleague had set up a stepladder and climbed up the earliest cabinet. As he took down and recorded the glass jars and their labels one by one, he asked, "Are you sure this junk is useful?—Small gongfu tea teacup, one, 'internship' written on it… And what the hell is this?"

His words paused. He picked up the jar and looked closely at it for a while. "The label says 'freed myself,' the memento is…a rag?"

Lang Qiao looked up at it. Her pupils shrank. "Give it to me!"

Wearing gloves, she carefully took the clear jar. Her heart gave a thump. In the chill and damp basement, she shuddered. It was a filthy, greasy sleeve. The old dirt reflected the light of the floor lamp; underneath was a faintly visible floral pattern.

In the photograph faxed over by the small town's civil policemen who had handled the arson case, the idiot had only had one sleeve!

"Xiao Lang," the person doing the right-most cabinet called, "come over here and look at this!"

On Saturday evening, Zhao Haochang had already passed a trying day and night at the City Bureau.

However pleasing to the eye a person was, after a sleepless night, the stubble and sebum on his face would be sufficiently disfiguring.

Zhao Haochang was in a somewhat sorry state, but he still expressionlessly maintained his posture. When he saw Luo Wenzhou come in, a file tucked under his arm, he even rather haughtily raised his chin.

“Hello, Attorney Zhao. I’ll start by saying a few simple things. First, it hasn’t yet been twenty-four hours, so we can still chat a little. Second, no one is preventing you from requesting a lawyer, no one has attempted to pressure you into a confession, and no one has mistreated you, is that correct.—Of course, if you must say that my bureau’s dining hall has injured your appetite, there’s nothing I can do. We truly don’t have the budget to order take-out.—On this subject, I suppose Attorney Zhao has no other objections?”

Before sitting down, Luo Wenzhou had already snatched away Zhao Haochang’s opening remarks.

The corner of Zhao Haochang’s eye twitched, as if he was infuriated by this attitude. He resisted displaying it and, in a deliberately slow voice, said, “You look rather familiar, but I’m afraid I’ve forgotten your name. How should I address you?”

Luo Wenzhou paused. Not only did he not get angry, he laughed. Then he lazily adjusted his posture and answered as if it didn’t matter to him. “Who, me? Seeing that you’re so clever, how about you take a guess.”

Zhao Haochang had been sitting too long. He was rather stiff, which impaired his originally skillful sneer. He pulled at the corners of his lips, not very naturally. “That shouldn’t be necessary. I don’t think we’re destined to see much of each other.”

Luo Wenzhou spun the pen in his hand. “You snuck into the East Flower Market District’s Gemini Building in the middle of the night

and damaged the security railing on the rooftop of Tower A, nearly resulting in…"

Zhao Haochang impatiently interrupted him. "I've already said, I didn't have any idea that there'd be someone there that night, or that they'd want to jump off the building in just that place. You say I destroyed public infrastructure, endangered public safety—OK, I admit it, I'm sorry, I can write a self-examination, a fine is no problem, either. Officer, not everyone can be paid out of the taxpayers's dollars. Those of us that have jobs are very stressed, sometimes in order to 'chill out,' you know, we may very well be a little irresponsible. I've learned my lesson, all right? Thank you, don't keep sending different people here to repeat the same words to me."

Having listened to this lengthy speech, Luo Wenzhou, smiling, said, "In all my years of work I've rarely come across a criminal suspect as cocky as Attorney Zhao."

Zhao Haochang said coldly, "Officer I-don't-know-who-you-are, could I ask you to pay attention to your diction? Why do you insist that I'm a 'criminal suspect?'"

Luo Wenzhou pulled back his smile and crossed his arms over his chest. "There are still a few other things I would like to consult you about, Attorney Zhao."

Zhao Haochang paused, gaze resting on his body language for a moment, then very magnanimously nodded and made a "go on" gesture at him.

"First, the lady who nearly fell off the building yesterday looked at your photograph and identified you. She says your original name is 'Zhao Fengnian' and you just happen to come from her hometown. Is that right?"

When Zhao Haochang heard the name “Zhao Fengnian” his breathing became noticeably strenuous, and his pale face stiffened so it looked like a piece of stone. His gaze, dripping venom, fixed on Luo Wenzhou.

Luo Wenzhou was entirely unmoved. He swept a bored look over the file and said, “Following her testimony, we inquired into Attorney Zhao’s background slightly. We found that you were born in a rather remote little village under the administration of the T City Prefecture in H Province. You previously used the name ‘Zhao Fengnian.’ Your parents were both disabled, engaged in agriculture at home, and you had three younger siblings. That’s a miserable history.”

Zhao Haochang’s expression cooled with every word he spoke.

And just at that moment, Luo Wenzhou looked up at him and feelingly said, “It looks like Attorney Zhao had it rough. I suppose you only had one or two people test into university each year there? Much less anything more, like becoming so respectable.—Also, I find that Attorney Zhao’s speech doesn’t have any trace of an accent. Was your speech so Western-flavored at home?”

Zhao Haochang’s hands, laying on the table, began to tremble uncontrollably. He seemed to be planning to stand up and beat Luo Wenzhou to the floor.

“Oh, I forgot,” said Luo Wenzhou, pouring more oil onto the fire, “I hear you haven’t been back to your hometown for many years. That’s not right, Attorney Zhao. Your fellow villagers worked so hard to support you. How can you forget where you came from?”

Zhao Haochang pounded on the table, breaking off Luo Wenzhou’s words. He was nearly standing, already out of his chair, leaning

forward a little like a beast of prey ready to pounce—several breaths later, using some enormous quantity of willpower, Zhao Haochang suppressed his violent rage and sat back down.

“Is that so? What a coincidence. I didn’t know.” Each word Zhao Haochang spoke seemed to carry the scraping of enamel. “I left home many years ago and don’t remember those people very well. Also, officer, I completed university entirely on student loans and scholarships. I saved for travel expenses myself. I didn’t trouble anyone to ‘support’ me. As for whether I do or don’t go back to my hometown, you seem to be going beyond the scope of your concerns, right?”

Luo Wenzhou said, “Upholding community order and good customs is also one of our jobs.”

The corners of Zhao Haochang’s mouth stuck up. “So you’ve established a neighborhood committee. No wonder so many major cases go unsolved.”

“I accept your criticism.” Having succeeded in angering the other party, Luo Wenzhou shrugged indifferently and changed the subject. “Speaking of major cases, there’s another matter I want to ask Attorney Zhao’s guidance on.”

He pulled a photograph out of the file and put it in front of Zhao Haochang. “This girl is called Chen Yuan. Some time ago she died of a drug overdose. She went to your school.”

In his rage, Zhao Haochang seemed not to have expected this twist. “That’s very regrettable,” he said dully.

“The circumstances of her death were unusual. Two weeks prior to her death, she contacted a university classmate called Cui Ying and passed on to her some important evidence identifying the Flower

Market District Sub-Bureau's Director-General as having participated in illegal activity." Luo Wenzhou looked him in the eye. "We just went to pay a call on this young lady. She submitted the evidence to us. She also mentioned you."

Zhao Haochang's eyes flickered and the fist laying on his knee tightened, as if he was quickly recalling his own oversights.

Luo Wenzhou said, "Cui Ying says that she shared Chen Yuan's story with you, and you prevented her from reporting it. Did this take place?"

"It did." Zhao Haochang quickly settled on a method for responding and sat up slightly straighter. "I really did watch that video, it truly was horrifying, but where should I have reported it? To their superiors? Officer, even sitting here across from you right now, I still don't know whether you're vermin with a human exterior. What if you're in it with them? Wouldn't reporting be walking right into a trap? We common folk of limited abilities can only play it safe. Is there anything wrong in that?"

"There isn't. What did you do after you found out about this?" asked Luo Wenzhou.

"I went to make an inspection," said Zhao Haochang, "but I didn't dare to go too deep, because one time when I was pretending to drive past, some people I suspected of being drug traffickers kept their eyes on me for a long time. I realized then that this was a very dangerous business and warned Cui Ying that she absolutely couldn't say anything about it. We could only act like it had never happened."

Luo Wenzhou lowered his voice slightly. "Cui Ying said that you once told her, if you'd killed someone, you'd leave the body in one of the drug trafficking locations in the West District, and they

wouldn't dare to investigate.—Did this take place?"

The corner of Zhao Haochang's eye began to twitch nervily. It was a long time before he took a deep breath. "I've been good to Cui Ying. She's a member of my school, in the same tradition as me. I've always tried to protect her. I don't know why she'd say that. It's clearly only a joke. I may have said it, and I may not have said it.—Although if a joke can be used as information against me, used to fabricate a charge against me… I really don't know whether this is modern civilized society, or whether I'm in the Great Qing Dynasty's literary inquisition…"

Luo Wenzhou suddenly interrupted him. "Where were you on the night of May 20th?"

Without even thinking about it, Zhao Haochang responded, "First I went with some friends to the Chengguang Mansion, then a friend took me back to the office to work overtime. I only left close to midnight."

"Where is your office?"

"Wenchang…"

"We got the security camera record from the Number 34 bus." Again Luo Wenzhou didn't let him finish. He pressed on, "He Zhongyi, the victim in the '520' case, got off the bus at Wenchang Intersection between nine and ten that night and then was murdered. In order to confuse the issue, the murderer dumped his body in the West Flower Market District—right at one of the drug trafficking locations. Do you have anything to say about that?"

Watching the interrogation room's surveillance feed, Tao Ran quietly said, "He was infuriated from the start and later he didn't expect that Cui Ying would 'sell him out.' Just now he was a little

out of control. When Captain Luo mentioned the Number 34 bus footage, he clearly panicked."

Fei Du pushed up his glasses. "Ge, does you letting me in here accord with regulations?"

"It's fine," said Tao Ran, "Director Lu specially authorized it. He's busy dealing with Wang Hongliang right now, or else he'd be here in person to get a look at you."

Fei Du thought about it. He didn't have any interest in granting an interview to a middle-aged man with a face full of wrinkles. Disapproving, he turned to look at Zhao Haochang.

Zhao Haochang's expression altered at first. He stiffened in place. But after a moment he seemed to realize something and put on a rather cunning smile.

"He's easier to infuriate than an ordinary person, and he also feels offended more easily, especially when others poke at his weak spots." Fei Du shook his head. "But to be able to bear it and still maintain his fundamental reason—he really is a genius. If it weren't for this business, I'd be willing to pay a high price to engage him as a regular legal adviser."

"He got off at Wenchang Intersection." Zhao Haochang slowly repeated these words. "And then what? What happened between him getting off the bus and him being murdered? You have no idea, do you?"

Luo Wenzhou slowly restrained his "pretending to be bored" expression and began to look unhappy.

"You have nothing." Zhao Haochang leaned back lightly in his chair. "A joke, a security camera record with no beginning or end,

and you want to trick me into betraying something with that?"

Luo Wenzhou didn't answer. An unbearable silence suffused the small interrogation room. He seemed to be all out of tricks.

Zhao Haochang couldn't restrain his laughter, then seemed to "remember" who this policeman at his wits' end was.

"Captain Luo, your solving of cases is too sloppy," he said, reaching out the diamond-inlaid brand-name watch on his wrist, tapping it towards Luo Wenzhou. "It hasn't been twenty-four hours yet. I see you have nothing else, so can I leave early? If not, you can also give me a bed. I'd like to lie down."

Luo Wenzhou inexplicably disliked his movement of tapping the watch. He gazed at him silently.

His expression amused Zhao Haochang to the greatest degree. He had succeeded in suppressing his fury, but he didn't succeed in suppressing his complacency. "Let me give you a word of advice, Captain Luo. Not everyone is going to fall for your outmoded interrogation techniques. Don't think so highly of yourself."

Saying so, he stood of his own accord and ostentatiously adjusted his lapels.

"Zhao Fengnian," Luo Wenzhou said quietly, "don't think so highly of yourself. In the west suburbs' North 20th Town, the basement of 12 Fengqing Winery is waiting for you to return."

Zhao Haochang's smile froze on his face.

Luo Wenzhou's index finger tapped twice on the table. "Can you explain why the victim He Zhongyi's old phone would be in your house?"

CHAPTER 32 - Julien XXXI

The interrogation room's door opened, and two expressionless criminal policemen came in, flanking Zhao Haochang to each side and pressing him back into his seat. Shining handcuffs clicked, closing on his flashing wrist, the metal of the cuffs a distant echo of the metal of the watchband, the two weirdly complementing each other.

Magnificent, cold as ice, and sharp.

Looking on from outside, Fei Du narrowed his eyes and assessed, "Your handcuffs are very aesthetically pleasing. Could I get a set to take back as a souvenir?"

Tao Ran didn't catch up at once. "What do you want handcuffs for?"

Fei Du turned to look at him, then, seeming to realize he'd been indiscreet, only meaningfully curved his peach blossom eyes.

Tao Ran belatedly groped his way to the meaning of this. As a conventional man whose life contained only overtime and home loans, Deputy-Captain Tao really couldn't appreciate this bourgeois-style lakes of wine and forests of meat. Seeing Fei Du's disgraceful behavior, he strongly felt his field of vision had been polluted. He then justly reprimanded, "Talk nonsense again and you can get out."

Fei Du gave a dry cough, properly suppressed his magic powers, which were unsuited to the venue, and didn't say a word.

The ice-cold handcuffs made Zhao Haochang give a fierce shudder. He came around and, not losing hope, tried to defend himself as

before. “Slow down, what house…”

Luo Wenzhou coldly interrupted him. “You want to say the house isn’t yours? Attorney Zhao, that isn’t what the Fengqing Winery’s security cameras say.”

The panic on Zhao Haochang’s face could no longer be suppressed. The handcuffs clanked.

Luo Wenzhou enjoyed his expression, then unhurriedly added, “Also, who told you we lost track of He Zhongyi after he got off the bus at Wenchang Intersection?”

“No, it’s…it’s not possible…”

“You’re under suspicion of premeditated murder and purposefully disposing of a body. Fearing that the victim’s relation would recognize you, you also tried to coerce an innocent woman to publicly commit suicide, and damaged high elevation guard rails. You involved yourself in the investigation repeatedly, attempting to mislead the police and frame another person.—Zhao Haochang, the evidence of these crimes is conclusive, what more do you have to say?” Luo Wenzhou suddenly looked up and glanced at Zhao Haochang, the corners of his lips turning up roguishly, displaying a pampered lordling’s scornful sneer, stabbing right at the pit of Zhao Haochang’s heart.

Luo Wenzhou said, “You’ve worked hard and struggled so many years, you were a step away from ascending to the heavens, and then with one wrong step you slipped and became a murderer. ‘What fate has ordained in the end comes to pass, what is not ordained cannot be asked.’ Zhao Haochang, I pity you.”

It was as if a needle had been stuck into Zhao Haochang’s chest. He lost control, hysterically crying out, “You call that conclusive

evidence? Did you film me killing him? Did you find my fingerprints or DNA on the phone? Zhang Donglai's fingerprints on that tie are clear as day, isn't that direct evidence? Which is solid, which is flimsy? Why are you saying it was me! Because Zhang Donglai is your director-general's relative? Because his family's rich? Isn't falsifying evidence and arranging frame-ups the police's specialty? Who knows whether you put that phone…"

Howling to the end of his breath, Zhao Haochang suddenly got a clear look at Luo Wenzhou's derisive expression. He quickly came back to himself and felt the inside of his head roar, all the blood in his body surging outwards to his stiff limbs.

Luo Wenzhou rested his elbows on the table and leaned forward slightly, attentively watching Zhao Haochang's bloodshot eyes. "Zhang Donglai's fingerprints on the tie are clear as day? Attorney Zhao, you're more capable than our medical examiners. They need to fiddle with their equipment making comparisons for ages, but you can know just by making a wild guess."

Zhao Haochang was stock-still, cold sweat slowly soaking through his sleek hair. The damp, chilly air-conditioning blew, and he shivered fiercely.

Luo Wenzhou laughed. Like a cat that had had enough of toying with a mouse, he lost interest in Zhao Haochang. He pushed his chair back and stood, indolently nodding to the two criminal policemen standing off to one side. "The criminal suspect—I suppose I can say that now, Attorney Zhao—the criminal suspect's crimes have been established. All that remains is a question of details. You guys go ahead and question him for a bit, I won't waste any more time on him."

Then he headed out. Just then, Zhao Haochang pulled at his handcuffs and, amidst the criminal policemen's scolding, struggled

fiercely and yelled, “Slow down, it…it was legitimate self-defense!”

Luo Wenzhou turned and looked at Zhao Haochang almost in wonder. He suddenly thought that so-called “dignity” was only a thin piece of wrapping paper, and when all one’s schemes had been exhausted, in the end the wrapping would come off with one tug, exposing the sorry body inside.—When Tao Ran and the others had broken up the mass brawl in the Flower Market District, the legal illiterate who’d made the most noise had said the same thing. Panicking, the great, glittering lawyer Zhao Haochang and the elementary school security guard Yu Lei came by different roads to the same end.

“Did I hear that right?” Luo Wenzhou tipped forward slightly. “Attorney Zhao, you, a leading light in your field, with your proper legal education, would call out ‘legitimate self-defense’ under these circumstances? Did the blow you dealt He Zhongyi rebound on your own head?”

Zhao Haochang’s face was dead white. He stared at Luo Wenzhou with enmity and malice. Nearly grinding his teeth, he said, “He Zhongyi took part in drug trafficking. He pestered me repeatedly, there was nothing I could do. I was forced to fight back.”

“He Zhongyi took part in drug trafficking?” Luo Wenzhou’s voice became heavy. “How do you know?”

Zhao Haochang’s cuffed-together hands lay in his lap, trembling unstoppably. He was clenching his fists tightly, nails biting into his flesh and drawing blood, but he hadn’t noticed it. “I have evidence, I have evidence! I know you’re investigating Chen Yuan’s case, I’m an important witness! I can cooperate with the investigation, but you have to promise me leniency!”

Luo Wenzhou looked at the security camera, meeting Fei Du’s gaze

through the equipment.

Fei Du leaned forward, arms crossed over his chest, and gave a rather interested “wow.”

“What is it?” said Tao Ran.

“He thought at first he’d won a complete victory, then he quickly experienced a fatal defeat. He panicked, became enraged, even slipped up and gave you something to use, but he’s been able to get a clear grasp of the situation this fast, adjust his emotions, and work out the trade you require.” Quietly, Fei Du said, “He really makes me think of a centipede in a swamp.”

An insect with a hundred legs, dead but not stiffening.

Luo Wenzhou sat back down across from Zhao Haochang. “Go ahead.”

Zhao Haochang took a deep breath. “I need your promise, a clean towel, and a cup of coffee.”

In the interrogation room, it was a battle of wits and a series of swindles. Luo Wenzhou considered it and felt that his “promise” wasn’t worth any money. Then he generously nodded. “Fine.”

A short while later, an exquisite porcelain tray was brought in from outside, with a moist towel, a napkin, and a richly-scented cup of coffee arranged on it; in addition, there were tidily arrayed Western pastries and a dewy fresh flower. Smelling all this, Luo Wenzhou knew it was that bastard Fei’s doing.

The clerk and the two criminal policemen exchanged helpless looks —and became indignant at the same time. They didn’t even get this kind of treatment when they were on duty during the Spring

Festival!

Zhao Haochang's expression changed. Looking at the flower, he seemed to recover some self-respect. This self-respect made him straighten his spine and speak decently.

"At the end of last year, in the capacity of a legal adviser, I took a team to see some clients in the East Flower Market District. I was going to be drinking that day, so I didn't drive. When we were through, I got a taxi nearby, and I was followed." Zhao Haochang unhurriedly finished eating, sipped the coffee, then let out a soft breath and closed his eyes. "Sumatran? Too earthy."

"Was it He Zhongyi who followed you?"

"Yeah, he recognized me and asked me for money." Zhao Haochang's voice had steadied. From wildly floating, his gaze had changed to firmly looking back at Luo Wenzhou. "Blackmail. He wanted 100,000 yuan."

Luo Wenzhou considered Zhao Haochang—he had a first-rate meat sack; it could be described as imposing and well-proportioned, and it was covered up with the skin of a social elite. It truly didn't seem like he could be browbeaten by someone of He Zhongyi's insignificant stature. "Did you give it to him?"

"I did. You must have turned this up in your investigation." Zhao Haochang pursed his lips faintly. After a night squatting in a little dark room, there were dark circles around his eyes, emphasizing how deeply set they were, looking unusually dismal. "My parents were both disabled. Including me, they had four children, two of whom also had problems. Starting from the time I went to middle school, there wasn't any money in the house to spend on me. I saved up to get free: carried things, did odd jobs for my teachers, picked wild fruits in the dead of night to bring to the market in

town to sell… I did everything so I could complete my education, so I could one day stand out.

“But you know what they said in the village? They said we were a family of ‘deaf-mutes.’ Later, when I finished upper middle school and tested into university, those people saw me in a new light. My house turned into a marketplace, people coming in and out, all of them peddling their families’ stupid village girls.

“But during my third year at uni, my little brother was born. My parents yearned to have another adult male around the house, but when he was born he was like my second sister, a congenitally deaf and dumb child with an intellectual impairment. It was a nightmare. From then on we once again became ‘a family of idiots’ to the village. It’s hereditary. In the future, my children will very likely be like that too, you understand? My career was just picking up, I had a girlfriend, I loved her, I couldn’t allow that sewer rat to blab in front of her, I had to give him some money to get rid of him.”

Luo Wenzhou looked down, knocked a cigarette out of a package, put it in his mouth, and considered Zhao Haochang through a cloud of very clear smoke. “Sewer rat?”

Zhao Haochang’s psychological quality was extraordinary. Even having come to this point, he still looked unflinchingly into Luo Wenzhou’s eyes. “Officer Luo, you grew up in Yan City, right? Then you definitely don’t understand what it’s like to be away from home, to live in one of the West District’s overcrowded rentals. I never dared to go out with my classmates, desperately earned scholarship money while I was at school, worked all the time after I got a job, all to save a bit of money to send home. My parents didn’t know what it was like for me out here, all they did was constantly ask me for money. Because of my little brother’s problems, they wanted to run the risks of advanced age and give me another child

to raise. The people in the village whispered behind their backs, the people in the village put pressure on them, and in the end all that pressure came down on me.

“My family had nearly sucked my marrow dry, but I didn’t resent them at all; I hoped their lives in the village could be a little better. I even asked for a vacation so I could help re-roof the house. But when it was only halfway done, I took a trip to the county seat, and when I came back, my home had burned down in an accident and turned into a ruin. My parents, my siblings were all gone, not one escaped… I was inconsolable, but a rumor went around the village that said that the fire had to do with me!”

He’d come to the important point.

Indifferently, Luo Wenzhou asked, “Oh? And did it have to do with you?”

The corners of Zhao Haochang’s lips pursed tightly, and he flared up. “You’d ask me that? Are you a beast?”

Luo Wenzhou crossed his legs, looking Zhao Haochang up and down without anger or surprise. Only when Zhao Haochang could hardly stand it any longer did he unhurriedly tap out his cigarette ash and flatly say, “All right, you’re pure and innocent, your plight is mournful, let’s continue with He Zhongyi.”

“I left my home, changed my name, thought I’d finally broken free of that barbaric hole, but the peace only lasted a few years before that trash He came to find me. He said it wasn’t the first time he’d seen me, he’d also seen my girlfriend, he threatened that if I didn’t give him the money, he’d tell Zhang Ting about my family’s hereditary disease and the supposed truth about the fire.” Zhao Haochang’s manner, tolerably even until now, began to roil like boiling water, thick hatred even covering up the coffee’s aroma,

assaulting the senses as if it had physical substance. “They ruined the first half of my life, they were going to ruin the rest of it, too, all my efforts and hopes, everything would burst into nothing where those nauseating worms had crawled. Why?”

“So you decided to kill him?” said Luo Wenzhou.

“I didn’t.” Zhao Haochang’s chest rose and fell violently. “I wanted to compromise and avoid trouble. I even got 100,000 yuan in cash and gave it to him. I only asked him not to mention me to other people. But he wasn’t satisfied, he was always pestering me. I even prepared to be blackmailed for a long time, and went out of my way to request an unregistered number he could use to contact me.

“I accepted my former academic advisor’s invitation and retuned to my alma mater to lead a class of shidi and shimei in real-world experience. I met Cui Ying, a girl with a gentle and quiet nature, very dependent. If she needed anything she’d ask me. One day she called me in a flurry, as if something major had happened. I listened to a few sentences, felt something was wrong, and immediately stopped her from saying it over the phone. I arranged to meet her…arranged to meet her in a private place.”

“She showed you what Chen Yuan had passed on to her.”

“I was very shocked, but to protect Cui Ying I ordered her not to talk about it. I went home and tossed and turned all night. Owing to my conscience, I decided to use my familiarity with the West District to verify the authenticity of the evidence.” Zhao Haochang quietly said, “And there I saw He Zhongyi with another…with a very skinny young person. I lay in wait until close to evening and saw the boy sneak over to a place near West Guanjing Street. It was one of the drug trafficking locations Chen Yuan had mentioned. He was a drug addict!”

From his description, it sounded like he was talking about Ma Xiaowei.

Zhao Haochang drank a large mouthful of coffee, as if to steady his emotions. “That drug-using boy took what he had bought back home. I followed him and saw him come ‘home’ with my own eyes. He turned on the lights, there were shadows on the window. That He Zhongyi was sharing the drugs with him! And he went back on his word and pestered Zhang Ting and let me catch him at it!”

“You saw the time Zhang Donglai beat him up?”

“Zhang Donglai beat him up, he didn’t dare to fight back, but he was looking at me the whole time,” said Zhao Haochang heavily. “He wanted to retaliate, I knew it, I was scared. After that I bent my head to him again, gave him what he wanted.”

“The cell phone,” said Luo Wenzhou.

“He was constantly insinuating to me about it, saying he’d seen other people using it and felt envious.”

Luo Wenzhou dully picked up a rollerball pen and twirled it around in his fingertips. He tapped the table with the shaft of the pen. “All right, even if he pestered Zhang Ting, how can you say solely based on some shadows on a window that he was using drugs? Do you have X-ray vision…”

“I said I have evidence!” Zhao Haochang interrupted him emphatically. “I installed two pinhole cameras in the ‘Golden Triangle Lot!’”

Luo Wenzhou inside the interrogation room and Tao Ran and the others watching outside of it all stared—they hadn’t found the cameras when investigating the scene.

“Of course I didn’t install them on the scene, otherwise those pieces of trash would have found them a long time ago.” Zhao Haochang seemed to have worked out what he was thinking. His gaze was faintly disdainful. “The West District’s streets are convoluted. There are places you think a road goes all the way through, but actually it’s blocked off midway. There are places you think are very well concealed, but actually there’s a projecting part of a far-off building that you can see everything clearly from.—I installed one camera outside the window of He Zhongyi’s apartment and the other on the roof of a nearby public toilet.”

The clerk’s forehead was covered in sweat; he simply couldn’t keep writing.

“What did you film?” asked Luo Wenzhou.

“I filmed the course of several transactions in the ‘Golden Triangle Lot.’ Sometimes there were only drug traffickers; sometimes you police degenerates were there patrolling, safeguarding them.”

Luo Wenzhou quickly followed up, “And the records, where are they?”

“There’s a safe under the floor lamp in my house’s basement, you can go investigate it,” Zhao Haochang said straightforwardly. “When you’re finished, you’ll know I’ve told the truth. He Zhongyi was very careful, usually he had his friend show his face, but on the evening of the twentieth, he gave that person the phone to exchange, and it was caught on camera.—There should also be a text message record on his phone, a notification that they’d changed the location of the transaction at the last minute.”

Luo Wenzhou considered him with a peculiar look, then suddenly asked, “There was a piece of paper on He Zhongyi’s forehead, with

the character ‘money’ written on it. When he went to see you that night, he had a kraft-paper envelope. Our technicians analyzed it, and the strip of paper was torn from that kraft-paper envelope and stuck to his forehead. That was you?”

“Yes.” Zhao Haochang raised his eyebrows. “He followed me all the way to Chengguang Mansion, shamelessly wanted to see me under the guise of returning my money.—There was 20,000 yuan in that envelope. Officer Luo, I ask you, aside from selling drugs, where is a poor country brat going to get 20,000 yuan?”

Luo Wenzhou was somewhat speechless.

“I also ask you, if an extorting and blackmailing drug addict suddenly wanted to return your money, how would you feel? Would you accept it with pleasure, think that he’d mended his ways? He’s certainly planning something else against you! He gives you twenty-thousand, it’s because he wants to get two-hundred thousand, two million out of your pocket! These greedy bumpkins, what do they know but money?” Zhao Haochang’s deep-set eyes were like two deep wells, hardly allowing light to pass, with bone-chilling darkness rippling inside. “I did it to protect myself, and to rid the people of an evil. Officer, where you worms and good-for-nothings had abstained, what did I do wrong?”

“Attorney Zhao’s moral is correct.” Luo Wenzhou nodded good-humoredly. “Could you give me the code to your safe? We’ll go check the evidence of He Zhongyi’s guilt.”

One of the criminal policemen beside them immediately handed Zhao Haochang pen and paper. There was a cold smile on Zhao Haochang’s face. He blithely wrote down the code.

Luo Wenzhou at once passed it on to Lang Qiao, who was at the ‘Fengqing Winery,’ and five minutes later received Lang Qiao’s

confirmation text.

“Thank you.” Luo Wenzhou stood up and smiled at Zhao Haochang. “Attorney Zhao, I just have two things left to say. Would you condescend to listen?”

Zhao Haochang was forced to raise his head to look at him.

“First,” Luo Wenzhou stuck up one finger, “He Zhongyi’s autopsy report showed that he had never touched drugs. As for the phone, witness testimony says that it was stolen by his roommate.”

Zhao Haochang’s brow furrowed. He was about to open his mouth to dispute it. Luo Wenzhou put up a second finger.

“Second, since you used your infinite resources to place the pinhole camera outside the window of He Zhongyi’s apartment, why didn’t you simply put it inside the room? Then you could film him day and night, film him eating, sleeping, and defecating. Wouldn’t you be able to know at a glance whether he was using drugs or trafficking them?”

Zhao Haochang froze at once.

“You’re too clever, Attorney Zhao.” Luo Wenzhou laughed. “Your humble servant is deeply gratified to be able to capture an asshole like you who won’t shed a tear until he sees the coffin. I feel it’s worth spending all the time I should be out having fun working overtime instead. As for my promise… Sorry, I’m an asshole, too. I'm only sincere in front of my wife. You… Leave it out.”

Luo Wenzhou stopped speaking. He didn’t feel like looking at this hypocritical painted face anymore and left the interrogation room.

Tao Ran didn’t come around at first. “What did he mean?”

“Using the images, you can trace the location of the cameras.” Fei Du stared unblinkingly at the crumbling Zhao Haochang. He quietly said, “He didn’t care at all whether He Zhongyi was innocent, whether he was involved with Ma Xiaowei and the others. From the time He Zhongyi started his unreciprocated attentions, constantly trying to contact him, Zhao Haochang wasn’t planning on letting him live.”

Tao Ran’s eyes opened wide. “You’re saying that he sent the video from the camera outside of He Zhongyi’s window anonymously to Wang Hongliang!”

“Though I don’t know why He Zhongyi escaped that calamity, that certainly does tally with the trend of Zhao Haochang’s logic.” Fei Du watched from afar as Luo Wenzhou threw on a jacket and stiffly walked over with a cigarette in his mouth. He turned to Tao Ran and nodded. “Ge, I’m not interested in the rest. I’ll be going.”

Then he pushed at his glasses and unhurriedly headed out. When he brushed past Luo Wenzhou, he looked curiously at Captain Luo’s rigid posture and very urbanely extended a greeting to him. “You seem to have strained your back. The elderly should look after their health.”

Luo Wenzhou: “…”

He was happy and laughing, and at the same time Luo Wenzhou inexplicably felt that the Fei Du of today was almost a little more carefree than usual—maybe because he had dug out a long-festering wound; it had perhaps been painful and bloody, but it had also been a fresh opportunity to heal.

“Let me ask you something,” said Luo Wenzhou. “Would you guess that Zhao Haochang was the one who killed his whole family?”

Fei Du was absolutely unwilling to cooperate and talk nicely. He mockingly answered, “Captain Luo, after all that time cheating and swindling, using hard and soft tactics, you haven’t worked out who killed the Zhao family?”

Luo Wenzhou’s back hurt hideously. He couldn’t quite stand upright. So he very rudely put his hand on Fei Du’s shoulder, using him as a human crutch. “It doesn’t look like it to me. Although our Xiao Qiao'er says he preserved the arsonist’s sleeve and therefore must have been at the scene, I still think that at most he watched them die without calling for help. Ordinarily, a criminal escalates. A novice will very rarely start out by tidily plotting to kill his entire family.”

Fei Du froze.

Luo Wenzhou shrugged. “I wasn’t alluding to you. I’ve already apologized.”

Expressionlessly, Fei Du said, “You’re pressing on my hair.”

He tilted his head, slipped away from Luo Wenzhou’s dog’s paw, distastefully dusted his shoulder a few times, and glided away.

“Captain Luo!” A criminal policeman ran over. “Huang Jinglian saw the evidence and freaked. He gave up Wang Hongliang and the others!”

Luo Wenzhou turned around at once.

“There’s also Chen Yuan’s case. Huang Jinglian says that it happened because he received a package. He opened it and found a film of their whole business process. They decided they had a mole and immediately started to investigate. They found the pinhole

camera hidden on Chen Yuan, and then they…”

Luo Wenzhou stared.

Perhaps Zhao Haochang had hidden the camera too well and Huang Jinglian and the others had missed it; perhaps Huang Jinglian hadn’t thought that the person who had secretly filmed them would use a camera in a fixed location that they could find, so his first reaction had been to look for a mole—through a strange combination of circumstances, an innocent girl had died in He Zhongyi’s place.

But the rash boy who couldn’t read others’s behavior hadn’t been able to escape the gaze from the swamp.

“Keep questioning them.” Luo Wenzhou stretched with difficulty. “See who sent that text message to He Zhongyi on the night of the twentieth.”

“Yes, sir!”

The reporting criminal policeman turned and ran off.

Luo Wenzhou stood where he was for a while, thinking deeply. Suddenly he felt there was a smell around him, very faint, winding around the tip of his nose thread by thread, then quickly reaching somewhere deeper. It was the lingering end of men’s Mu Xiang[41]. Smelling it for a long time made the heart itch a little.

Luo Wenzhou searched all around and at last raised his own fingers and lightly sniffed them. He found that he had picked it up from Fei Du.

Luo Wenzhou clinked his tongue and rubbed his fingers together in disappointment. Having found the source, he didn’t itch anymore,

and he didn't think it smelled good. "What's the use. Waste of my damn hormones."

[1] Apart from this one, which is my doing, further quotes from Stendhal's *Le Rouge et le Noir* come from the translation by Horace B. Samuel, available on Project Gutenberg. http://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/44747.

[2] Bao Zheng, Song Dynasty politician seen as a symbol of justice, often portrayed in fiction with a crescent moon on his forehead, like so: https://newbloommag.net/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/1309430085-804x1024.jpg

[3] Idiom meaning "distance yourself from a life of crime."

[4] That is, unbridled debauchery and licentiousness. Reference to a story about an evil emperor who had a lake of wine and tree hung with meat and made naked men and women chase each other in front of him.

[5] In the original novel (the *Red and the Black*, that is) it's in Latin: "Incedo per ignes."

[6] Xiao (小) and lao (老), respectively "young" and "old," are used as familiar nicknames; I've chosen to leave them untranslated.

[7] Flower and Fruit Mountain, a location in Journey to the West.

[8] From a letter collection by Shen Congwen (沈从文); no published translation exists, as far as I know, so you're stuck with my best attempt.

[9] Terms referring to sibling relationships are commonly used as friendly forms of address; ge (哥) is older brother, di (弟) is younger

brother, jie (姐) is older sister, and mei (妹) is younger sister.

[10] His name means “happy and carefree.”

[11] 于 - yu (a preposition); 磊 - lei (heap of stones), made up of three 石 characters (stone).

[12] This is a call-back to the eunuch joke in Chapter 3; Court Supervisor was a position filled by eunuchs.

[13] Dage (大哥) literally means eldest brother and is used as a friendly term of address for older males.

[14] Character from the 90s drama “My Fair Princess,” played by actress Vicki Zhao, who does indeed have dramatically large eyes.

[15] China’s emergency services number for the police.

[16] For reference, in China, middle school refers to grades 7 through 12, divided into junior middle school (7-9) and senior middle school (10-12).

[17] Xiong (兄) is an honorific used between male friends.

[18]A location typically depicted wreathed in clouds.

[19] In Chinese physiognomy, supposed to be a very fortunate combination.

[20] His given name means ‘good person.’

[21] From a story: In ancient times, there was a man called Zhang San. He buried his silver in the ground and was afraid someone would come steal it, so he put a sign above it saying, “Three hundred silver coins are not buried here.” His neighbor Wang Er stole the silver and left a sign saying, “Wang Er from next door did not steal.” In other words: an attempted cover-up that draws attention instead.

[22] The cat’s name, Yiguo (一锅), in fact means “a pot.”

[23] An actress from Hong Kong, currently aged 65 and still exceedingly beautiful.

[24] 22 for men in China (and 20 for women).

[25] Typically used to refer to people in the same school (in this case younger students), and I’m keeping it untranslated to make my life easier later.

[26] It won’t surprise you to learn that this is the area of China.

[27] Character from “The Injustice of Dou E,” a play in which the titular character is wrongly accused of a bunch of things.

[28] Could equally be translated as “marriage interview”—a meeting arranged to size up a potential partner.

[29] A euphemism for “massage,” here also used euphemistically.

30 Like this: https://cdn.shopify.com/s/files/1/0566/6837/products/remy-martin-xo-cognac-excellence_1024x1024.jpg?v=1560868995

31 Internal restrictions carrying especially heavy penalties issued by the Public Security Bureau in 2003 to improve their image, including things like “follow all firearms regulations” and “don’t use firearms when drinking.”

32 Traditionally given as awards for merit, look like this: http://nwzimg.wezhan.cn/contents/sitefiles2012/10062331/images/2765732.jpg

33 Common idiom meaning refined speech.

34 Traditional unit of measure, about 1/15 of a hectare.

35 Warring States era general, was publicly very unfriendly to a minister of the time, so the minister once turned his carriage away rather than jostle for right of way with him; when accused of cowardice, the minister said that since the two of them were responsible for the government and the military, it would be wrong to let a personal feud cause trouble. Hearing this, Lian Po was ashamed and wore thorns on his back to beg the minister’s forgiveness. Later they were friends.

36 A point of clarification: the “feng” in his actual name is 丰, first tone; the “feng” that Zhang Ting heard He Zhongyi say, presumably because she had trouble with his accent, was 冯, second tone, a surname.

37 A technical term for something China’s got a massive problem with; in other words “good old honest graft”—bribes and gifts of dubious legality (read: illegal, but people don’t like to think of them

that way).

38 Or Dokodemo Door, from the anime Doraemon, does exactly what it says on the tin.

39 National Judicial Examination, required test for anyone going into legal professions, including lawyers, public procurators, notaries (with about a 10% pass rate, for reference). Superseded in 2018 by the National Unified Legal Professions Examination, which expands the professions included.

40 Fairly clear in context, but it's a conventional usage that refers to housing built in rural areas on what's meant to be public land, not registered with or paying taxes to the central government but receiving authorization from the village authorities; in sum: they receive no official legal protection, and property transfers are unrecorded.

41 Also called costus root, used medicinally and in perfumes.